



3

—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious

XII

水瀬葉月

Illustration ねろひがため

電撃文庫

Cube×Cursed×Curious

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



3
シーキューブ
Cube×Cursed×Curious
XII

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Cube×Cursed×Curious

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Scene01:波乱の修学旅行

「うさぎさん。昔のやな……」

???

修学旅行先で遭遇した新撰組好きな少女。このはに異様な執着を示すが、その本性は——!?

うえのきりか
上野錐霞

当然のように引率役となつてクラスを引っ張る委員長。でも、この修学旅行で大事な選択を迫られ——!?

やはるあき
夜知春亮

旅先でなにをしかすかわからないフィアのおもりに気を使いつつ、それなりに楽しんでいるようです。

「手を噛まれないように気を
つけたほうがいいぞ、フィアくん」

フィア

はじめての京都奈良でおおはしゃぎ。当然のようにシカせんべいに自らもチャレンジ!? お味のほどは?

「おおお、食つておる……
おせんべを食つておる……」

同志……」



み や ま か な
実耶麻渦奈
クラスメイトの彼女
もはじめて見るこの
はの“爆なるもの”に
思わず拝みポーズ。

「ふおー！
いつのはっ……
いいものだなー！」
露天風呂と、

「ヒェー！ お、おら、トンデモないものを
見ちまっただ……浮いてるだ！
村の言い伝えは本当だっただ！」

むら まさ
村正このは
お風呂では向かうと
ころ敵なしです。修学
旅行中とはとあるきっ
かけでいつもより大
胆に!?

Scene02:魅惑の露天風呂

3
「シーキューブ」
Cube×Curse×Curious

C³
「シーキューブ」
ヒロインズ

上野錐霞

春亮のクラスのいつも冷静沈着な学級委員長。纏っている呪われた道具のため、露出の少ない格好をしている。

「馬鹿なことをな」

「あーん」

「うちのお店、美容室『壇ノ浦』をよろしく〜」

人形原黒絵

本性は和人形だが、すでに呪いが解けている。髪を自在に伸ばしたり操ったりすることができる。

フィア

主人公・夜知春亮の父により発見され、その本性は32の形態の拷問処刑器具に変形できる立方体。自らの呪いを解くべく夜知家に身を寄せる。好物はおせんべ。

「よう、メイメイのおじいちゃん、おはよう〜」

「春亮くん、わたしもお料理手伝いますよっ」

村正このは

本性は妖刀村正と呼ばれる日本刀。春亮と同居している巨乳でメガネで面倒見のいいお姉さん。お肉大好き。

桜参白穂

春亮の同級生で、誰もが息をのむクールビューティー。人間が嫌い。サヴェレンティの所有者であり恋人。

サヴェレンティ

すべての人形への王権を持つ、呪われた人形。女性体にも男性体にもなれる。快活なドジっ娘さん。

夜知春亮

呪いを受けつけない体質を持つ高校生。料理はじめ家事全般が得意。お人好しで困った人を放っておけない。

「サヴェレンティさん、いれば幸せよ」



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エピローグ





シーキューブ
CubexCursedxCurious

XIII

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Prologue

Konoha reached towards the card in the middle—But that was a feint. The silver-haired little lady's face distorted slightly to show an evil grin.

Then swiftly moving her fingertips again, Konoha made a grab for the card on the left—But this was also a feint. The silver-haired little lady's eyebrow twitched slightly.

Still so easy to read, Konoha thought to herself and directly drew the card on the left, but in that very instant—

"I-Impossible!? It's the Joker?"

"Puhu—! Damn Cow Tits, you totally got fooled! Judging from your look just now, surely you were thinking 'still so easy to read,' right!? Hmph, I've already figured out your little brain circuits that are small enough to fit in my hand... So just give up and it'd be best if you shrink those cow tits that are giving me eye cancer so that they fit in my hand as well, how's that!?"

"Guh! When did you start learning these petty little tricks of deception...!? Looks like I have underestimated you. Still, I have no intention of losing. Things will not go your way from here on!"

Sitting opposite, Fear scoffed with a look that seemed to be saying "Just try it if you think you can—" with a taunting grin. Then she opened the backpack on her lap and began rummaging through it.

Konoha sighed lightly and turned to the side, presenting her cards up high towards the person sitting next to her. Thinking calmly, she found it quite strange to be playing cards together like this. Her neighbor—Kaidou Imi the teacher in the bright-red tracksuit—was in the process of adjusting the shovel between her knees slightly while saying: "Students, despite the different circumstances right now, I do not want excessive loud chattering so please pay slightly more attention to your noise level. I might consider disciplining you if this racket continues."

With great manliness, she instantly drew the Joker from Konoha's hand. Presumably due to seeing the card in her hand, Kaidou emitted a soft groan.

Since the shovel had yet to be mobilized, there was still room before lines were crossed but Kaidou's person alone was plenty intimidating already.

Fear fished out a packet of rice crackers from the backpack she had been searching.

"Sure, yeah. I swear I'll be more careful from now on, but these rice crackers are very tasty. I hope you'll try some, Sensei. Let me state for the record that this absolutely isn't bribery or sucking up to the teacher... Honestly."

Making a look as though she were feeding a ferocious beast, Fear stuffed a rice cracker into Kaidou's mouth. Kaidou began to chew, producing crunching noises. Even after Fear withdrew her hand, the piece of rice cracker remained hanging between her lips. Chewing on the rice cracker in this manner, Kaidou turned herself and presented her cards to the next player. At the end of this row of three seats, sitting by Kaidou's side was the assistant homeroom teacher who served as her aide—Sagisaki Saki-sensei. She had a petite figure, wore thick glasses exhibiting swirls and was dressed in a plain, navy-blue suit with black garter stockings. She seemed especially timid and lacking in confidence. Konoha did not know if that was because she had freshly joined the workforce or simply her personality.

"U-Uh, which should I pick...? I seem... quite indecisive... Ah oooh, seems like I need to apologize to everyone, sorry for taking too much time. Even though I know this is bad and I should act more like a reliable teacher, awawawa!"

"Munch munch much... Sagisaki-sensei, it is highly unlikely that anyone would judge your image as a teacher through this game of cards. I suggest that you try not to worry so much and just pick any card."

While the two teachers were conversing, Kana made a thumbs up while sitting beside Fear.

"Fear-chan, well done! Operation Echigoya, success! You're quite a villain~!"^[1]

"Kukuku... All conflict will disappear in the face of rice crackers, because they're simply too tasty. Even though this wonderful food can clearly contribute to world peace, why doesn't the United Nations set up a World Rice Crackers Organization to devote efforts towards protecting and developing rice crackers...? It's totally mind boggling."

Naturally, Fear also took out her share of rice crackers and began to munch heartily. Konoha already knew that in addition to her backpack,

Fear had stuffed every outside pocket full of rice crackers, calling it the "exclusive bag for rice crackers." Konoha sighed deeply and said:

"I don't know how many times I've repeated myself already. The iron-clad principle for times like these is to keep baggage to a minimum as much as possible. I'm not asking you to not bring snacks but you can easily buy them locally at the destination."

"That's right! Local purchasing—That's what I'm very looking forward to! There could be rare rice crackers there that I've never seen before, no, there definitely will be! That gives me even more reason to finish gobbling these rice crackers here! Because I must make space, the rice crackers I'm taking home as souvenirs won't fit at this rate! Acceleration Mechanism—Go!"

Fear instantly increased her rice cracker eating speed and Konoha gave up on wasting more words. At this moment, Sagisaki-sensei finally managed to draw a card.

"Hmm... I guess it's this one! Eeee, it's the joker! This feels like a great failure that a teacher really shouldn't make!"

But didn't that smug teacher beside you draw the Joker without hesitation? Naturally, Konoha had the tact to refrain from voicing these thoughts.

"Uh... The next player seems to be Ueno-san...?"

"Oh sorry for not paying attention. Then I'll draw now."

Sitting next to Kana, opposite to Sagisaki-sensei, Kirika was apparently looking around a bit. Konoha could understand vaguely what she was looking at while returning to the game as if nothing had happened.

The girls were sitting in a space where two rows of three seats each were positioned facing each other. Separated by the aisle, a set of opposite-facing two-seaters was where four boys were playing card mahjong. He was among them.

Because Konoha was frequently glancing at the same person all along, naturally, she could understand.

Although it was the same as usual, Konoha could sense that Kirika's glances were more frequent than before. This was surely because the situation was different, whether for Konoha or Kirika.

The current situation was one where people would spontaneously hope to see special moments of a particular type and devote more glances than usual. In a certain sense, such behavior was also only natural.

Indeed—This was the situation where they were taking the bullet train on a long journey together with him.

Even for Konoha who had been living with him for many years, this was quite a rare experience.

Haruaki and his classmates, a total of four of them, were playing card mahjong. Although he did not know how to calculate the points, he still retained lingering knowledge of the basic rules and card suites that his father had taught him in the past.

"Hold on, thinking too long is forbidden!"

"Hmm—Yeah, we can't allow Haruaki to stay so far in the lead any longer...! But I'm a lost cause. Taizou, I'm counting on you!"

"He clearly looks like he's putting out cards arbitrarily in leisure. Is detached indifference the trick to victory?"

Taizou and his two buddies Animori and Murasawa were staring at their respective cards solemnly. They looked like they were going to take some time, hence Haruaki turned his gaze towards the interior of the train car.

At the adjacent row of three seats—currently turned around to produce a six-seater arrangement—Fear's group was currently playing old maid harmoniously. Apart from the original quartet of Fear, Konoha, Kirika and Kana, the leaders Kaidou-sensei and Sagisaki-sensei had also joined them for some reason. What a rare sight.

Fear began to holler: "So... very fast—!" while pressing against the window, trembling emotionally on occasion but eventually got used to it as time went by. Chewing the rice crackers from her exclusive bag for rice crackers, she was happily playing cards while squabbling with Konoha on occasion.

Haruaki leaned out slightly to gaze further down the aisle behind him where another group of girls were sitting.

"Sigh, Sakuramairi-san, don't just keep staring out the window! Let's have some girl talk on exciting and embarrassing topics, and try some sweets too! I've brought so many snacks, so be my guest and have some! Go on!"

Resting her chin on her hand, Shiraho was gazing at the scenery outside the window. Her classmate Sorashiro was shoving snacks towards her face. Shiraho pushed the food away in apparent annoyance. Upon seeing the snacks she had pushed away, she even began to frown.

"Goodness gracious, that's enough, stop annoying me. Why don't you hurry up and take a nap as usual...? Right, Hinata, don't you usually eat Pocky during these occasions? Why did you bring steamed buns?"

"I'm getting a head start! Like practicing a traditional Japanese mood first!"

"Absolutely nonsensical."

"My discovery... So round... I stare—"

Noticing the gaze from the opposite seat facing her, Shiraho narrowed her eyes, grabbed Hinata's hand that was holding the steamed bun and forcefully changed its direction. After Shiraho shoved the steamed bun forward, bringing it to the lips of the dark-skinned female student. The round shape was gradually eroded while she chewed.

"Wow! I-Izoey-san is so cute! I've got lots more so eat as many as you like!"

"My comment: due to round and delicious, I give reaction of gladly accepting your kindness."

"Do as you wish. Sigh... Although it's just a few days, not being able to see each other whenever we want is such suffering... Sovereignty..."

Shiraho turned her gaze outside the window and murmured to herself, sighing in melancholy. Meanwhile, Hinata was feeding Un Izoey successfully. Haruaki concluded that this group was relatively peaceful as well.

Soon after, the number of mahjong rounds reached half-game and it was time for a break. Haruaki left Taizou and the others to shuffle the deck while he got up to go to the washroom.

The first washroom he found was occupied and displaying a red light. Standing in the narrow corridor between train cars, Haruaki looked around

in search of vacant washrooms. Then the it just so happened that the previous washroom opened. The heavy door panel slid open sideways and the person exiting was—

"Oh hi, Class Rep."

"Yeah, Y-Yachi..."

Haruaki greeted her as usual, but only came to a sudden realization after seeing Kirika's gaze wander in a slightly troubled manner. Glancing at the washroom symbol, he noticed that it was a unisex washroom. Entering directly after her would seem a bit lacking in delicacy. But on the other hand, turning around and leaving did not seem right either, because it felt like a message of "I don't want to enter after you" which would end up being even more impolite, right...?

These troubling thoughts rapidly swirled and occupied Haruaki's mind in short time. Should he enter or retreat? Presumably, Kirika was also feeling similarly indecisive about her next action. Her hand remained on the washroom door without moving. Just at this moment—

Bump.

"Uwah!?"

"Kyah...!"

The bullet train was shaking a bit. Haruaki instantly lost balance and pushed forward out of habit to avoid falling. He had no choice but to take a step forward but Kirika was right in front so all he could do was guard with his arms and ended up pushing Kirika's body backwards. As a result, Kirika's hand naturally released her grip on the door she was holding onto for support, in other words—

Thud.

"..."

"..."

Hearing the sound of the heavy door closing due to its own weight—

Haruaki found himself tightly packed into the cramped washroom together with Kirika.

His arm was wrapped around her waist as though embracing her tightly. Naturally, he had reached out frantically to prevent her body from falling over backwards. Hence, the two of them were tilted in a subtly out of balance state in the same spot. Haruaki could feel from his fingertips the sensation of something hard beneath her uniform as well as something soft even further beneath. Their faces were very close together. He could see her face turning bright red.

"Y-Yachi...!"

"N-No, sorry, anyway, I'm sorry! I was afraid you might fall so it inexplicably became like this!"

"Idiot, don't be so loud! If we get seen by others in this situation...
A-Absolutely ridiculous...!"

This situation. The situation where the two of them were squeezed in a cramped washroom, pressed tightly together as well.

If they were seen by others—Indeed, it would be a very serious problem!

"Yeah. Seriously... Absolutely... ridiculous..."

But incredibly, Kirika did not take further action. Without pushing Haruaki's body away, she simply whispered her usual catchphrase weakly. Haruaki actually felt her exerting more force through her arm instead... Definitely his imagination. Perhaps due to being severely out of balance, she was very careful in taking the first step. Indeed, she must be worrying about moving recklessly and losing balance even more, which might end up putting her hand in contact with the washroom floor. So that explained it.

But this posture could not be maintained indefinitely. Resolving himself to take action proactively to fix the problem, Haruaki started moving. First, he had to regain balance. Hence, he shifted his feet slightly then supporting his upper body that was still leaning forward, he then moved his hand—

While pondering, his first move in progress ended up failing spectacularly. Next to his foot was a pedal for turning on water at the sink. Accidentally, he had stepped on the pedal. In his forward leaning posture, Haruaki's head happened to be just above the sink, therefore—

"Uwah, so cold!"

"Y-Yachi, what's with you?"

"Ugh—I used my own head to block the water that came out because I stepped on the pedal... I'm so clumsy."

Several moments later—

"Ha... Fufu... You're really..."

Kirika could not hold back anymore and laughed quietly. The reward for his foolish act was that he was finally able to stand up straight and release his arm as well so that the two of them were simply standing in the washroom—that said, Haruaki still had doubts whether the word "simply" could be applied to the situation so casually. Haruaki responded to Kirika with a smile to hide his embarrassment.

"H-Hahah... No, I'm sorry. Uh, anyway... Let's go outside first."

"O-Of course. We have to get out first."

Checking out the surrounding situation, they carefully stepped out of the washroom. Luckily, no one saw them. Breathing a huge sigh of relief together in the passage, after a moment of silence facing each other—

"So... Uh, I'm going to enter again. For the original purpose."

"Y-You don't have to report to me deliberately. Absolutely ridiculous."

Of course, Haruaki entered another washroom, exclusively male, which was now vacant after their little slapstick episode.

Naturally, being a boy, Haruaki did not take long. After finishing his business quickly, he walked out. There were two independent sink spaces next to each other in the passage. Kirika was still standing before one of the sinks, drying her wet hands with a handkerchief. Using the mirror, she looked at Haruaki and said:

"Let me ask just in case, you're okay where the water struck you, right?"

"Ah... Yeah, I just got splashed a little. I've wiped it a bit just now so it should dry quickly."

Haruaki was also starting to wash his hands at the adjacent sink. At this moment, the sound of the passage's automatic door opening could be heard.

"My statement: please wait. I report back with a report that I am currently in the passage."

It was Un Izoey's voice. After washing his hands and leaving the sink area, Haruaki could see Un Izoey with a cellphone against her ear, her sports bag placed on the floor while she was crouched down. She looked like she was going through her luggage to find something.

"By my judgment, I conclude that the problem might have become reality. Really, not here. No, present it may be, but fewer than expected—Yes. One day's portion. My analysis: because I kept it on the table earlier, intending to have it carefully washed before setting off on the trip—but too carefully, I forgot to take it..."

Un Izoey sat down on the floor with a thud, keeping the phone against her ear using her shoulder while pulling out something from her luggage that resembled a hand towel and spreading it out. Judging from her replies that could be heard vaguely, she probably discovered she had forgotten to pack something only after someone phoned to inform her.

At this moment, Un Izoey turned around and glanced at them. Although she had sensed their presence from the beginning, it seemed like she had not recognized their identity as acquaintances until now. Instantly, she swiftly stuffed the towel-like object back into the depths of her bag.

"! ...Eh? Y-Yes? The itinerary for this class? Please wait, I am looking for the handbook..."

However, she did not hang up but began flipping through a booklet she took out instead. What did she forget to bring? As much as Haruaki felt curious, the attitude she displayed after discovering Haruaki and Kirika seemed a little frantic and embarrassed. Since she was a girl after all, perhaps it would be best not to interfere recklessly.

About to return to her seat, Kirika also noticed Un Izoey and stopped walking while eyeing her suspiciously.

"Hmph. I hope you're not scheming something devious."

"Haha... She shouldn't be. See, she's been very rule-abiding lately. Also in the earlier incident as well. She should know how to discern what is right and wrong."

"You mean Amanda?"

Haruaki nodded in response to her slanted gaze and recalled what had happened a few days earlier.

At Un Izoey's request, the group had gathered at the Yachi residence.

At the time, she had finally fulfilled the earlier promise—Allowing Haruaki's group to meet the recovered Amanda. A former member of the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion, Amanda ended up with a broken mind after a complicated interplay of goodwill, malice, intention and coincidence. Earlier, it was difficult to meet her due to her health condition but the recovery treatment had finally concluded and she was supposed to have regained the ability to move about like a normal person.

"She looks very healthy, thank goodness... Although we didn't get to talk much."

On that occasion, Amanda basically spent all her time hiding behind Un Izoey's lab coat in shy awkwardness. Although she was originally an enemy, they had lived together once even if only for a couple days. Haruaki's group was equally unsure what attitude to take towards someone like her just as she was apparently confused about her position.

They ended up not doing much. After seeing her face, Fear and the others smiled with relief. After they asked "How are you?", she nodded while hiding behind Un Izoey's lab coat, causing her white hair to bob up and down once. This reunion was truly trivial and quite boring but one thing was certain, the mood was very warm and congenial.

"However, the only problem is that she joined the Lab Chief's Nation. The way I see it, that's completely insane. They must have taken advantage of her helplessness to recruit her. This organization is the worst as expected."

"But Un Izoey said that her job is like ordinary chores."

"Even not as a researcher, simply staying in that rotten organization will gradually taint her. If possible, I really want her to quit... Hmph. However, since she used to be part of another organization, at least she won't place blind trust in that man from the get go. That is the only saving grace."

Speaking of blind trust—Haruaki shifted his gaze. Un Izoey was still talking on the phone while searching her luggage. In the past... Haruaki remembered the first encounter during the cultural festival. That was how Un Izoey looked back then. Was she still blindly believing everything Pakuaki said?

"..."

Haruaki could not decide. Were it not for the experiences to this date—without what had happened during Christmas, the third school term and in spring—he definitely would not be having such doubts now. Perhaps that in itself was a kind of answer.

"Yachi, what are you spacing out for?"

"Oh sorry. It's time to get back."

In any case, they left Un Izoey alone and returned to their seats. Kirika played cards with Fear and the girls while Haruaki resumed the card mahjong game with Taizou and the boys. For some reason, the boys even named it the 'Yachi Haruaki Revenge Cup.' Haruaki was certain that his earlier success was clearly just good luck.

While arranging the initially dealt cards, Haruaki felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. The text message subject was "Commemorating the establishment of the Lonely to Death Alliance." The body had no content apart from an attached photo, taken next to a table in some kind of cafe or restaurant with Kuroe and Sovereignty smiling happily shoulder to shoulder while making victory hand signs.

Catching sight of silver motion from the corner of his eye, Haruaki turned to look at the adjacent seats across the aisle. Fear and the girls had also taken out their cellphones to check the screens in the middle of their game of old maid. The same text message was apparently sent to everyone in the usual group.

Fear looked towards Haruaki and said:

"You received it too? Damn that Kuroe, how is that lonely to death at all? They clearly look so happy."

"Just let it slide... It'd be true if she were left behind alone, but now that there's someone else to play with her, that's actually good. Otherwise, I think she'll try to come along with us no matter what."

On the other hand, a certain person who had to set off alone was probably having a tougher time. Haruaki turned to look at the seats behind him. Probably due to receiving the same text message from Sovereignty, Shiraho was hugging her cellphone against her chest, almost about to faint.

"Ahhh! I can't stand this any further! In any case, I'm so lonely I'm about to die! Ahhh!"

"Sakuramairi-san has suddenly become very interesting! Hey, don't get so emotional. Eat a steamed bun and calm down!"

Hearing that cheerful voice behind the seat, Konoha closed her cellphone.

"It's just four days and three nights, Kuroe-san still has work and this is a school trip as well. I have never heard of school trips where family members came along as well. As much as I sympathize with her, she has to be the one to watch the house."

"She does deserve sympathy but Konoha-kun is right. Then at least we should take more care in choosing souvenirs for Kuroe-kun."

"Ueno-san, there's no need for you to trouble yourself over that. Although not recently, Kuroe-san frequently likes wandering off and traveling all over the place. Since our destination is a must-see in terms of tourist attractions, she has probably visited it many times already."

"A must-see... This kind of place will really... Oh."

Fear frantically closed her mouth and drew a card from Kana's hand as though trying to cover up something. Apparently getting the Joker, she immediately began to pout.

Haruaki knew what Fear was trying to cover up. Due to the presence of Kana and Sagisaki-sensei, as well as Taizou and the boys on Haruaki's side, Fear could not blurt things out recklessly.

"Indeed it's a must-see. There should be quite a lot of people who went in middle school already—"

"Those who are going for the first time in high school could very well be the minority. It seems like the destination is the same as last year's. In any case, it's all decided by the superintendent's whims."

"Since Fear-chan was born overseas, perhaps this could be considered a perfect pick, the most standard tourist spot best exemplifying traditional Japanese style. This isn't anything bad at all. Since there's no need to be too excited, personally, I'm quite enjoying it."

Listening to Kirika and Kana's conversation, Haruaki began to recall.

He recalled what happened several days earlier, on a certain day in early May, in the superintendent's office.

Ever since the last incident, Fear had kept saying: "I want to actively collect more Indulgence Disks." Hence, the superintendent had summoned Haruaki's group.

Haruaki could imagine vaguely why Fear had made such a request.

During the previous incident, after encountering and parting with an underclassman girl, Fear had discovered a dormant power inside herself. Using two Rubik's cubes simultaneously, she had transformed both of them into her emulated forms, tools of torture and execution. After discovering the new combat technique of Dual Emulation—precisely because she discovered it by accident—she realized that it was necessary for her to restrict her functions more actively. Haruaki understood quite well. As for whether there were other reasons... He had no idea.

At least it was certain that Fear did not quite enjoy manifesting "her past self" to use as weapons to begin with. This inevitably made her recall her past and gave rise to the risk of getting devoured by dark memories. Ever since Haruaki encountered Fear, although she always looked like she was controlling the cube nonchalantly, Fear was probably constantly paying attention, staying on alert and persistently resisting that darkness.

One alone was hard enough already, but now that there were two, Haruaki could easily imagine the pathways towards contacting that darkness to have doubled. He could also imagine the voices whispering contemptible curses to have doubled. Hence, in this regard, for the sake of reducing the curse, Fear could hardly be blamed for wanting more strongly to obtain Indulgence Disks than before.

In any case—

The superintendent had agreed very readily to Fear's request, apparently still feeling that he owed them favors. He promised Haruaki's group that he would gather all available information about the Indulgence Disks' whereabouts and try to get his hands on them if possible. After making this promise, this was the first time he summoned them all to the superintendent's office, hence, everyone in addition to Fear was filled with anticipation, of course.

However, facing Haruaki's group who were standing ready before him, sitting in front of the usual desk, the superintendent said:

"Puhohu... You will obtain what you desire as long as you go west. Fufu!"

All he gave was ambiguous information that resembled the guidance that sages would offer heroes in video games. Despite their efforts to pursue the matter, the superintendent simply kept silent and shook his shoulders happily, leaving them no choice. All they could do was set off for this westward journey without finding out anything further. Considering the timing, the superintendent's cryptic hint was definitely related to this trip, but even to this point, Haruaki still had no idea what he meant specifically.

(I suppose his message can be interpreted as: we are able to obtain an Indulgence Disk during this trip? Even without given any information beforehand...? Hmm—If only coincidences were really that favorable.

Even without the answer, the bullet train still continued on its way at three hundred kilometers per hour, carrying not only Haruaki and friends who were baffled by the superintendent's unfriendly prediction but also the entire second-year student body of Taishyuu High out west.

In other words, for certain people, this could be considered the most important major event in their high school lives—namely, the school excursion with the destination being—

Kyoto and Nara.

Chapter 1 - Journey of Shining Gold / "the park where deer run"

Part 1

Experiments and test runs.

Having obtained a new toy, she needed to perform these two tasks first.

She must confirm how it felt during usage. The new toy—but more accurately, it was actually a second-hand toy. The previous user... It was possible she might acquire strange habits due to that particular auxiliary.

It was imperative to verify the detailed functions—or rather, the cursed abilities. She had taken action precisely in order to obtain information about the cursed abilities, but reality could turn out different from what she expected.

It was imperative to verify the curse. This was the simplest and the most unavoidable issue.

One after another...

She conducted her task of verification while trying her utmost not to attract attention.

By this point, there was no need for haste. Precisely because what she desired was within arm's reach, it was even more important that she must avoid haste.

The feeling when using the tool—No problem.

Cursed ability—Just as informed. Or rather, just as predicted. No problem.

The curse—No problem when used under ordinary conditions. Possible to endure.

But this was not where the issue lay.

Because this implied that small issues would arise when the tool was used in situations deviating slightly from ordinary levels.

She believed that given who she was, she should be able to withstand it without even the concept of "enduring" surfacing, however, that curse slightly exceeded her predictions. Hence, that issue must be handled.

However, there was no need for haste on this issue either.

She asked herself:

—What is it that I need?

First of all was herself. The meaning of existence, what currently existed and frequently in short supply. Hence, it was something that sought the past as well as the future. A pure and unadulterated concept. An absolutely undistorted journey, unchanging truth and what dragons possessed.

In other words, «Strength».

This matter did not require further, deeper thought. All she needed to do was what she had engaged in repeatedly all along—namely, training—this time directed towards the specific form of training this toy required. Perhaps phrased differently, she needed to grow accustomed to it. All she needed to do was feed a suitable volume of repeated activity to the mouth known as time, and she would surely build up the strong flesh and blood this body required before long.

However, that alone was not enough. Upon calm reflection, it was still not enough.

Even with the future strength gained through training, she still needed something else.

Another essential element. A physical element. A device for lessening curses—

In other words, the Indulgence Disk.

She had reached a revelation that things were incomplete unless all requirements were met. Hence, she had started operations to this end.

She did not know the concrete whereabouts of the Indulgence Disks, but that was no big deal. Regarding possible locations where they could be found, she already had ideas. Regarding possible people in possession of them, she also had clues.

Indeed—In any case, she decided to first try contacting comrades.

Although gathered together in pursuit of the same goal, these people risked their lives in battle instead of greeting one another. Perhaps in the eyes of ordinary people, this type of relationship could not be considered that of comrades.

Part 2

The vast historic public park occupied an area of six hundred and sixty hectares, encompassing countless tourist spots, the west side being an urban area where the Kintetsu railway station was located, while the east side was filled with lush greenery and the towering mountains of Wakakusa and Kasuga—

"This is what I'm talking about, Nara Park!"

"Umuu, you've really lost me, nuhaha!"

Fear was walking beside Haruaki, her silver hair swaying proudly. After answering Fear's careless question of "What is Nara Park?", Haruaki narrowed his eyes.

"You don't actually intend to understand anything, right? To think I even took out the booklet to read out to you."

"How should I put this...? What I wanna know about isn't that stuff. A park? In the end, it's just a park? How is it different from the park near our home? Are there swings?"

"Haruaki-kun, I would advise you to give up on a lost cause. No matter how much of a detailed explanation you try to provide to this girl with no common sense, you'll just waste your efforts."

"What are you talking about, damn Cow Tits!? I'll curse you!"

"Well... It's true that there's a limit to how much can be explained through words. You ought to tell Fear-kun what makes it different from the parks she knows."

"Yeah, Kirika-chan is right. I agree that having an actual look around would be faster than explaining—"

After getting off the bullet train at Kyoto station, Haruaki's group had taken a bus to Nara. All the students were scheduled to tour Nara on the first day of the school excursion. Then currently, they had gotten off the bus and

were marching grandly towards Nara Park. Also, Sagisaki-sensei was trailing at the end of the class, presumably suffering from motion sickness, walking unsteadily while supported by several female students. So who's actually the leader here?

"By the way... What's up with that exactly?"

"That?"

"That."

Seeing Fear make a rectangle with her fingertips from both hands, Haruaki figured out what she meant. She was talking about the other purpose of this trip—the Indulgence Disks. Although the superintendent had said ambiguously that "something good will happen if you go west," nothing had happened yet so far.

"After all, it's just the first day. Since the superintendent hasn't said anything, it means we don't need to know. Anyway, getting too bothered by it won't help at all."

"Really... But I wanna get it as quickly as possible if it's truly available..."

Fear exhaled forcefully as though trying to suppress her impatience. Even standing here, Haruaki could feel the impatience that Fear had been frequently exuding recently. Probably because she took his advice that "getting too bothered by it won't help at all," the wave of impatience quickly passed.

Indeed, this was a rare school excursion. Rather than getting distracted by incomprehensible things, Haruaki wished she could enjoy herself more in this place that was different from her usual environment.

After a moment, Fear suddenly started looking around.

"Hmm, the smell's changed... There's the scent of grass and trees. Plus this...?"

"Oh, hey Fear, hurry and look at this!"

By the time they noticed, a giant structure was already visible up ahead. Immense in area and solid in construction, a majestic piece of the landscape exhibiting a great sense of weight. The low-key colors of the bricks and timber looked natural and ancient but rather than exuding an air of neglect, it gave off more of a comforting sense of calm and stability. It

was flanked by a giant Buddha guardian statue on each side, glaring wrathfully at oncoming visitors. People were currently passing through the massive colonnade between the two statues, stepping one after another into the structure—

This was the national treasure, the Great Southern Gate of Toudai-ji. ^[2]

"Wow..." "Nwoh—!"

While Haruaki exclaimed in admiration, he could hear Fear shouting. She was surely touched by the sight of one of Japan's prided national treasure. Just as Haruaki was feeling a little proud—

"S-S-S-S-So cute! Such round eyes! So perfectly round!"

"What the heck!? Your tastes are too weird! Hurry and apologize to Unkei-san, apologize right now!" ^[3]

Hearing Fear's unbelievable comment, Haruaki turned towards her in shock, only to see her staring intently with unparalleled interest at the herd of deer resting by the side of the road, rather than the Great Southern Gate or the Buddha guardian statues. Haruaki instantly felt drained of energy. Speaking of which, deer could be seen throughout Nara Park. Still, one should first notice the national treasure, right? One should first notice the venerable and elegant Great Southern Gate, right...? Just as Haruaki was thinking this, he discovered that almost half the class was pointing the lenses of their cameras or cellphones at the deer instead of the Great Southern Gate. How lamentable... But precisely due to harboring such thoughts, wasn't that why people often called Haruaki old-fashioned?

At this moment, Kaidou-sensei's voice was heard. All the students stop taking photos and turned to look at her.

"Including the Great Buddha Hall, there are many famous sights ahead. Students, since I am sure all of you would like to tour the premises at your own pace, you have one hour of free time starting now. After that, make your way towards towards Shousouen and gather in front of the central gate—Not here. Do remember to gather at the central gate further ahead. Do not wander off too far, make too much noise or cause trouble for others. I do not seek perfection but if I see anyone behaving out of line... I shall not show any mercy even if it is currently a school excursion. Understand what I am saying?"

"Y-Yes!"

Seeing Kaidou pat her palm with the shovel, the entire class had no choice but to answer in unison. During the few months since entering second year, everyone had already found out how terrifying her punishments were.

Then free time started and Fear took her cellphone and kept snapping photos like the others.

"Nuu, what's going on? This place is wonderful. It must be that, a park with a concept very similar to that Woof Meow Friendship Park. I finally get it...!"

"Don't go comparing Nara Park with that place, okay!?"

"By the way, this question has been bothering me, Kana, for the longest time already. Why are there deer here? The smart duo over there, pray enlighten me please~"

"Eh? Me? If you say that... I suppose they're simply indigenous to begin with. Because it's basically all mountains nearby."

"Hmm. I also seem to have heard before that the Kasuga Grand Shrine regarded the deer as a type of very auspicious creature, which is why they were preserved and seldom harmed by humans..."

"Wow—As expected of the class rep! Oh, h-however, Konoha-san's explanation is more simple, I like it very much, it's very easy to understand!"

Although it was currently free time, Haruaki found himself still surrounded by the usual lineup for some reason. The class had been divided into a number of groups for the Kyoto sightseeing on the second day and beyond. Right now, they were moving in their groups, in other words, the neighbors during the ride on the bullet train.

"Fufu. Miyama, it's all going just as planned. Please keep this up... I really hope to walk together with girls more on this rare school excursion... Even watching while standing on the side is fine!"

"Without attracting attention, keep these two groups moving together as much as possible'—I haven't forgotten this secret agreement. You guys better not forget a month's worth of cafeteria coupons either... Heeheehee."

Haruaki's classmate and group member, Animori, was apparently having some kind of suspicious conversation with Kana... Haruaki decided to ignore them for now.

After taking photos, Fear squatted down on the spot, apparently still interested in the deer lying on the ground before her, resting her elbows on her knees while staring at the deer with obsessed rapture.

(Hmm... Examining calmly, these deer do look quite cute.)

Their black, round eyes looked wise and enlightened while the droopy eyelids seemed sleepy and about to close any time, extremely cute. Displaying the colors of the autumn grain harvest, their golden fur must surely be soft and fluffy to the touch. There were also the spots distributed evenly across their fur, short stubby tails, exquisite little hooves... Ahhh....

"I-I really wanna ride one..."

"Hold on! I was just about to agree with you, but that thought never occurred to me!"

"Why? Judging from size, I think it'll work unexpectedly well."

"It's not a matter of size!"

"Then what's the matter!?"

Things would be so much easier if he could say directly: "it's a certain very simple matter of mass," but Haruaki did not want to suffer injuries on the very first day of the school excursion. His gaze wavering, Haruaki said:

"Ah! ...That's right, I remember there's a rule here that the deer in the park are now allowed to be ridden. Class Rep mentioned just now that the deer are considered sacred creatures here."

"Muu. If there's a rule, it can't be helped."

"That's right, at most you can only feed them reverently. Like with those."

Haruaki used his thumb to point at a simple vendor stall set up using just a parasol and a table. When Fear saw the words written at the stall, her face changed all of a sudden.

"Deer... crackers...?"

"Oh right, there's that kind of thing as well."

"Yes. Just feed a few to the deer to commemorate."

"How can you guys act so casual...!? Unbelievable! As much as I seek rare varieties of rice crackers, even I falter at the sight of these rice crackers! But as the rice cracker master, I can't ignore them either... This is such a struggle!"

Fear clenched her fists and seemed to be panting in great suffering. She definitely must have misunderstood.

"...Let me clarify. It's not called that because deer meat was added. It's just rice crackers for feeding deer."

"What are you talking about? Th-That's so misleading! For sure, I thought you were going to say: 'Let the deer eat those rice crackers and force them to cannibalize their own kind! Wahaha!' That kind of inhumane and atrocious suggestion!"

"How could I possibly suggest what you described!?"

"Then in order to stop Akki who almost fell to the dark side, I, Kana, shall be devoured by dream-like dark forces instead... That'll be the back story, so let's go let's go! Hehehe, prepare yourselves, little deer, I shall stuff your stomachs to their fill, turning you all into big fat deer! And you'll get seconds! Even if you scream and cry, I shall not have mercy on you—!"

The members of the group approached the vendor one after another. After taking out her purse, Konoha looked at the vendor apologetically.

"Excuse me... I don't have any change on me, will it be possible to get change...?"

"If possible, I hope you won't pay with large bills."

"Oh! K-Konoha-san, I have a lot of change that I want to spend right now! I-If you don't mind, allow this humble Hakuto Taizou to pay for you!"

"Although I really feel bad about this... I'm sorry, could you lend me some change?"

"Of course, gladly!"

Through the corner of his eye, Haruaki saw Taizou getting greatly excited and emotional. In any case, everyone bought deer crackers successfully and approached the herd of deer—More accurately, because the deer

were used to being fed already, the instant they bought deer crackers, several deer already approached them on their own.

"Ohhhhhh, it's eating! It's eating the deer crackers! Comrades!"

"Fear-kun, be careful so that your hand doesn't get bitten."

"Yeah—Although their eyes are so round, it's a bit scary when they show the whites of their eyes when focusing too much on eating..."

Haruaki whispered to the deer that was engrossed in eating deer crackers. Although Fear would also eat rice crackers fervently, at least her eyes never rolled up all the way.

"The second piece? You want a second piece? You greedy fellow!" Kana handed out a second piece just as she described. At this moment, Haruaki suddenly noticed Fear freezing.

"Hmm..."

She was staring intently at the second rice cracker she had taken out to follow Kana's suit. Then suddenly—

She bit down. Crunch crunch, she chewed.

"Y-You really did it! To be honest, I was expecting you to do so all along!"

"Muumuu, it's nothing special. Completely tasteless."

"Of course. That's because it's not meant for human consumption in the first place."

"I believe that food is better the tastier it is, no exceptions! This is even more true for rice crackers standing at the pinnacle of food! This is my belief as the rice cracker master... Hence here's my reverse thinking! If I feed these deer the carefully selected rice crackers I've brought, they might end up dancing in joy from the excellent taste! Very well, in order to reward them for welcoming me with their cute appearances, I'll spare at least a piece..."

"Slow down and listen to others. Deer crackers are unflavored because deer cannot ingest too much salt. Feeding them rice crackers meant for humans would cause problems instead. Stop it right now."

"Muu—"

Fear pouted, of course. But her mood soon recovered after she successfully seized an opportunity to stroke the soft fur of a deer's head. Thank goodness her temperament was this simple.

The group decided to move on once their deer crackers were almost all fed to the deer. Passing through the Great Southern Gates, they arrived at the central gate. "That gate was big enough already but why are the gates here increasingly bigger! Are there giants to pass through?" Fear kept expressing surprise towards the giant size of the gates.

From the central gate, they followed a rectangular C-shaped corridor and reached the reception area for entering the Great Buddha Hall. After passing through the reception area, they entered a space exhibiting a great sense of layering. Standing upright on a flat, green area was a giant wooden structure. Simply looking up to view the building filled the viewer with great awe for its grandeur.

Then mounting the stone steps to finally reach the building's interior—

"Eh?"

Haruaki expected an exclamation of "So big—!" to reverberate through this entire space for sure. However, Fear remained very quiet instead. Haruaki glanced at her, only to see Fear's mouth gaping open while she was looking up towards the owner of this building—namely, the massive Buddha statue venerated here, bearing a classical smile of calmness on its face. Apparently, its excessively giant size had ended up breaking Fear's surprise meter instead.

"Uwah... Quite astounding. This is truly frighteningly huge..."

"Indeed, the feeling is very different when viewed in person. I wonder how many Fear-kuns it would be equivalent to?"

"The answer would depend on whether you're measuring in terms of height or weight."

"Damn you, Cow Tits, shut up! It should be measured in terms of your excess volume! How enviable, simply two or three of you would be enough to cover its entire volume. As expected of cow udders that expand when soaked in water, increasing to an excessive and useless degree!"

"Nothing of that sort! Why are you treating me as wakame seaweed!?"

"Nyah, everyone is so friendly as usual... Eh, where's Taichii?"

Kana suddenly started looking around. For some reason, a voice came from below.

"Help! Haruaki, help! I'm stuck—!"

Upon further examination, Taizou was stuck inside a pillar, struggling desperately with only one arm visible.^[4]

"What happened? Did he run over to torture himself? I never knew that Taizou had that kind of special preference."

"It's said that passing through the hole at the base of this pillar will bring good luck... It's supposedly because the hole's size is the same as one of the Buddha's nostrils. But anyway, it's usually much younger children who attempt to squeeze through."

"Fufu, because I really can't suppress my urge to seek happiness..."

"Now isn't the time for acting cool. Anyway, we have to pull you out quickly. Come and help, Fear."

Haruaki and Fear grabbed Taizou's arm and pulled, freeing him from the pillar. Definitely not small, Taizou was actually quite large in build. Attempting the challenge was sheer recklessness.

"Oh my oh my, thank you very much... Oh Fear-chan, what's up?"

"Specifically, what does this good luck refer to?"

"Hmm... Clarity of mind, success in love, free of disease and disaster! Basically summed up as achieving happiness! I'm not too sure myself but the Great Buddha is surely omnipotent and omniscient, definitely bringing me great luck!"

"Hmm... Achieving happiness... Really? Okay, since it doesn't hurt to try, I'll make an attempt too!"

Fear knelt down before the hole in the pillar. Since her build was much more petite than Taizou's, she should be able to fit through given some effort. Standing behind her, Haruaki smiled and watched Fear. With a vigorous shout, Fear stuffed her head into the hole, squirming through with her silver hair. Still outside the hole, her bottom moved up, exposing a certain something under her skirt—

"..."

Pat. Pat.

Before Haruaki could turn his gaze away, he already felt hands on his shoulders.

Stiffly, he looked right. Standing with a smile was Kirika. Looking left, he found Konoha standing there with a smile. Furthermore, Konoha was also using her other hand to grab Taizou's right shoulder. Taizou's left shoulder was caught by the smiling Kana. This situation looked totally new—a sense of totally new despair.

Haruaki already knew what was going to happen next so he remained silent. In contrast, Taizou whined nonsensically:

"Ooh... Oh... I-It's not what it looks like, hold on, this is just an unfortunate accident. But since my shoulder's caught, does this mean I'll receive punishment from Konoha-san next? A rare chance for direct skin contact, wow! I never expected the effects of passing through the pillar to arrive immediately, thank you, Great Buddha—!"

What can I say? —Haruaki could not help but feel impressed with Taizou. This guy really was good at enduring a beating.

After a basic tour of the sights in the surroundings of the Great Buddha, they returned to the gathering place or in other words, in front of the central gate. Since there was still some time remaining, Haruaki decided to make a visit to the washroom while Fear and the others started playing with the deer again.

After walking for a while, he found the public washrooms. Mixed among the tourists and fellow Taishyuu High students on the excursion, he finished his business. Then after exiting the washroom—

He witnessed a strange scene.

Or rather, Haruaki initially mistook someone for Fear.

To be honest, the only similarity was probably their mini-sized height, but apart from that, they were completely different in both appearance and temperament. After thinking calmly, Haruaki decided there was absolutely no characteristic that could lead to misidentification, however—

Although the mistaken impression only lasted for an instant, there was only one reason why he would mistake the person for Fear.

Namely, that person was currently riding on a deer's back.

"What—!?"

Haruaki never expected anyone apart from Fear to possibly do it—or rather, actually do something like this.

Presumably because it was extremely rare for humans to ride them, the deer was dashing madly at full speed in utter panic, running straight for Haruaki. Just as he heard the girl give off a brief "Ah" from atop the deer—

"Gwah!"

Naturally, Haruaki was unable to evade because things were happening too suddenly. Struck by an impact on his side, Haruaki was knocked flat on the ground. Despite the soft fur on the deer's body, a violent collision was still quite painful. Next came a second impact. Falling from above, a certain object's weight pressed down on Haruaki, instantly forcing the air out of his lungs. Despite his great suffering, Haruaki still forced his eyes slightly open in an attempt to confirm the situation—

Then their eyes met.

Looking up while lying flat on the ground, he saw the girl that was on top of his chest. More accurately, the two of them were currently in a state that could be described as an embrace. Due to cushioning the girl's fall with his own body, he had ended up protecting the girl, preventing her from getting hurt. That should be considered a good thing. Nevertheless, Haruaki did not have any thoughts to spare on calmly pondering this matter. Instead, he became aware that his right palm was undeniably pressed against the girl's chest right now, causing him great anxiety. As for why he had not noticed earlier, how should one put it...? It was because her bust was quite flat, the same type as Fear's.

"Mmm... Ah..."

"Oh, wah! Sorry!"

Haruaki frantically pulled his hand away and the girl slowly got up, resulting in a posture of sitting on Haruaki's chest.

The girl was dressed in an outfit that was as frilly as a doll's but also resembled a kimono as well. Haruaki recalled from a fashion feature on television that mentioned the term "Wa Lolita"^[5], which was probably what style this girl's clothing was. Worn on her feet were retro-style boots. The

short skirt on top of his chest felt quite soft in texture. Her white thighs appeared in a corner of his field of vision, forcing Haruaki to understand that he must absolutely forbid his gaze from shifting any further down.

The girl's slightly long hair was curled and quite puffy. Her downward gazing eyes were the type to exhibit a slight amount of visible white between the iris and the lower eyelid. Probably because of that, her gaze seemed quite fierce and vicious. But overall, the impression she gave off was that of a cute girl in addition to being scary, like a solitary tiger or a proud stray cat of high pedigree.

"A-Are you okay? Did you get hurt? If you're unhurt, I hope you can get off from me sooner—"

"! ...This... What a blunder..."

As soon as the girl saw Haruaki, she stared wide-eyed as though in surprise and whispered. Haruaki could catch a faint glimpse of her cute little fangs. Blunder? Just as Haruaki heard those words, the girl stood up without hesitation. Clearly Haruaki was still looking up at her from below. Hence, she ended up standing astride Haruaki's face as soon as she stood up. How careless.

Haruaki reflexively closed his eyes and tried his best to drive away the memory of the white color he witnessed beneath the skirt. During this time, he heard noises.

Rustle. Thud thud. Patter.

"...?"

Haruaki opened his eyes in trepidation. Only after confirming that the girl had already moved away did he sit up and survey his surroundings. He originally thought that the girl would have said something at least, having experienced a collision and accidentally getting groped in the chest, but all he saw was the girl receding into the distance as she departed silently as though escaping.

"What's with her...?"

As the Lolita outfit's Japanese-style patterns disappeared out of view, Haruaki was left whispering in puzzlement without moving from his position.

Incomprehensible. All he knew was—Indeed.

Deer's backs must not be ridden, just as expected.

The deer from just now was snorting, giving off airs that seemed to be saying "I transported her here, dude, so pay up now" while nudging its snout repeatedly against Haruaki's back.

Part 3

She was playing with the toy in her hands.

A mask. A clip-shaped fastener was attached to the edge of the mask next to an eye, connected to a short wire extending outwards. On the other end of the wire, a slim device resembling a pocket calculator was shaking nonstop.

This was a mechanism for connecting an Indulgence Disk.

Capable of simply lessening a curse without degrading a tool's cursed abilities (but for some reason, the effects were different for Fear-in-Cube alone), Indulgence Disks were undeniably useful. However, this effect did not come about through mere proximity alone. Due to requiring the installation of this kind of mechanism, she had obtained an Indulgence Disk that happened to be in the possession of one of the «High Singles» through an open duel, fair and square, then forced a Draconian technician to create one of those devices.

It was said that the Knights' Dominion would install a complicated suicide mechanism known as «Euthanasia» onto this type of connecting device. But since all she needed was the transmission of the Indulgence Disk's effects, it was completed in roughly a month.

Nevertheless—

"In terms of results, this is still not enough."

This was the conclusion she had reached after undergoing many experimental trials that also served as training.

Hence, she made this decision.

"Still not enough?"

The one asking was another person who stood ready by her side, having remained silent until now. One who could be considered a part of her.

"Precisely. Although it's just a feeling."

"Then what do you intend to do?"

"Nothing changes. More preparation and more training."

"Preparation meaning?"

"Simple to the extreme. Add another Indulgence Disk. When ordering the creation of this device, I already demanded that this level of capability expansion must be included."

"Understood. Have you located one?"

Obtaining another one from within the Draconians would probably pose a challenge. The previous Indulgence Disk was only obtained because that particular member of the Draconians happened to be on Dragon Island. But she had already investigated. There was no one else in possession of an Indulgence Disk at the time among the members who could be contacted immediately. In other words, even if news were to arrive about a certain Draconian obtaining an Indulgence Disk, finding the person would surely take a lot of time. The Draconians were essentially willing to head to anywhere on the planet so long as they could fight strong foes. Even fighting man-eating crocodiles in the interior of the Amazon rainforest would not be strange.

Hence, she turned to other avenues to search for the locations of other Indulgence Disks.

"I have contacted the intelligence network just now. Someone has recently gotten hold of an Indulgence Disk. A black market 'supplier'."

"Where is that person?"

"Supposedly in the western part of this country."

Given this information alone, nothing more needed to be said regarding the next course of action.

Filled with loyalty and sincerity, a pair of eyes looked towards her.

"As your subordinate, I will assist."

"Of course. Before the opportunity arrives, I cannot take action. Hence, you are the lead actor instead."

"The specific location?"

As yet unknown. However, she believed that the chance to discover the person's location would come naturally. Considering reasons for the 'supplier' to visit, it was most likely related to Fear-in-Cube's faction that they were monitoring closely. In that case, something was sure to happen as long as they continued to observe Fear-in-Cube and the others.

"Conclusion—maintain a distance, neither too far nor too near, and observe without taking action for now."

"...Yes."

The reply seemed slightly lacking in vigor. Then the other person also asked: "Then I shall standby for now currently?"

"You will be required to mobilize once the location of the 'supplier' is known. Hence, you may rest and recover readiness while on standby. The upcoming location is a tourist destination... It is said that Nara Park is extremely vast and also has deer residing inside. As long as you are cautious, you may amuse yourself a little to serve as entertainment."

"Yes... Deer... Amuse..."

Caring for a subordinate's mental condition was part of a superior's duties. Precisely because there were difficult tasks ahead, proper rest was required beforehand so that maximum power could be brought out when the time came.

"There is no need for you to worry. Go ahead and have fun—Yes, to think that deer could be ridden, this does look like an interesting place."

Naturally, she was only joking.

Part 4

Ueno Kirika was very dispirited.

The first day was about to end on this extremely precious and irreplaceable school excursion. Strictly speaking, the day had yet to actually end, but for the majority of Japanese people, taking a bath was considered the final activity of the day. Almost about to end was virtually certain.

(...This is absolutely terrible.)

Inside the small bathtub of her hotel room's bathroom, hot water was gushing out of the shower, splashing against a bondage suit of black leather.

It's that time of the month for me, so I won't be going—Together with Kana who believed in this lie, Fear and the others had headed over to the large public bath with apologetic expressions on their faces. Kirika felt bad for making them worry about her. If Kirika were not rooming with these girls, she would surely be scared and on edge all the time in this situation surrounded by classmates everywhere, unable to take a shower or a bath, even inside her room, even with the bathroom door locked.

However, she was not absolutely not depressed because of this situation at hand. Ever since a long time ago, she had already resigned herself to accept this cursed and abnormal outfit to accompany her for the rest of her life. By this point, she could not possibly feel inconvenienced or dissatisfied.

"Ooh, so bad..."

This time, a bitter moan was uttered from her mouth. She recalled what had happened on the trip so far.

After touring Nara Park, they had taken a bus to reach Kyoto. Then they had arrived at this hotel that was going to serve as their base of operations for the remainder of the school excursion. After an especially grand and luxurious dinner, it was now bath time. During this whole day—

"We almost... didn't get to speak at all...!"

Kirika smacked her forehead against the bathroom wall with a thud then held still, allowing the hot water from the fixed showerhead to flow across her back.

Putting aside what happened on the bullet train because it was an accident, during ordinary times apart from that, during the time known as the school excursion—She almost never had a chance to speak to him.

Of course, it was not entirely zero. They had chatted and laughed together as usual, making eye contact. She had also stared at the profile of his face on her own.

In spite of that, she still felt dissatisfied—

Selfish, self-centered and egoistic.

The level of happiness that she subconsciously desired, the target value she had subconsciously set was not met.

Understanding her own greed, she also believed it was only natural. She was serious about her feelings. She had also prepared herself for battle. Then in other words, the issue was—

"A-Am I being too self-conscious...?"

A certain matter kept occupying her mind.

On the bullet train, on the bus, in Nara Park, in the hotel, at the dinner table. Even before embarking on this school excursion, inside the classroom's restless atmosphere, even on the way to and from school.

Girls were whispering discreetly. In order to avoid letting boys overhear, girls were whispering in one another's ears like little children.

—School excursions are so romantic. You can grow close all of a sudden. After all, it's a restless state different from usual. I've heard that couples result every year from the trip. It's not weird at all. After all, there's a liberating feeling, the boys know it very well too. During the school excursion, defenses are zero. Seize this only chance. Only chance for what? A confession of course. After much thinking, I think chances are highest during the school excursion. Since you have to confess eventually, why not do it now—

"Uhahhhhhh!"

Kirika felt something boiling and scalding overflow from the depths of her heart. Her face had turned even hotter than the bath water. Like holding down a pressure cooker's lid, she pressed her forehead firmly against the bathroom wall, even performing headbutts repeatedly.

The conversation between unknown girls was not directed towards her of course. Absolutely not eavesdropping, the voices had simply flowed into her ears naturally. But because of that, an element of truth existed. A truth shared in common by the creatures known as ordinary high school girls—Right?

The topic of school excursions naturally led to confessions. Chances of success were highest during this occasion. Really? Is that really true? Will it be too impetuous? No, it won't. This is a good chance. Because I've already decided. Given an opportunity, I can't welcome it more. But I'm

completely unable to make opportunities. Excessive self-awareness is making me shy and my movements stiff. This isn't working.

"That's right, I need to be more ordinary, more ordinary... Just like usual. No, if it's possible to attack, of course I should work hard and attack. After all, I can't be nervous when the time comes, arghhh, absolutely ridiculous—"

Kirika stopped headbutting and spoke quietly as though talking to herself.

In any case, she must not waste the prime opportunity presented by this school excursion. Right now, she had to focus her willpower and make the most of this opportunity as much as she was able to.

"Besides, it hasn't ended yet. Even the first day hasn't ended yet. It's simply just about to end. That's right, Ueno Kirika, do your best—"

But she knew that this conclusion was simply delaying the greatest challenge.

In the end, was she going to be able to achieve her ultimate goal? If she achieved it... What would happen? Supposing it was a most happy future, then what?

"Heha... Yachi..."

She felt a wave of pain in the depths of her body. A pain accompanied by a different temperature from before. Her face collapsed, unable to return to normal, almost drooling.

"Ah! ...N-No no!"

Simply from the vague shadow projected on the bathroom's plastic wall, she knew that her current expression was very dangerous and must absolutely not be seen by others. By the way, what kind of sound was "heha"...! Truly and absolutely ridiculous!

"A-After a bath, there's still chance for contact. I just have to ambush him in the lobby, claiming to be buying juice! Ah, this expression cannot be shown to others. Ueno Kirika... H-Hurry and control your emotions...!"

She began to hammer her forehead against the wall again. In order to hide her embarrassment as well as to warn herself.

It looked like she still needed some time before calming down completely. But at least, she did not need to worry about hitting her head and bleeding all over the place.

Naturally, what she meant was that in the event that she bled, it would heal immediately.

Part 5

"Woah—! Open-air baths... really are great—!"

Fear leaned her back against a moist rock and stretched while speaking. Feeling the cool breeze against her upper body while the lower half was bathed in steaming hot water. The experience felt quite new and refreshing, unlike a usual bath.

"...If only Kirika could join us... I think she's looking a bit strange today. I'm sure she'll be re-energized if she could get a dip in this lovely hot water."

"It can't be helped since it's that time of the month for her... Besides, ever since Year 1, Kirika-chan has always been afraid of changing in front of others."

Fear was originally murmuring to herself but Kana apparently overheard. She also proceeded to soak herself in the hot water as well.

"So this is your first time trying a Japanese open-air bath, Fear-chan?"

"Of course it's my first time! It feels so liberating, a bit different in style from public baths... It's a very splendid zone!"

Fear came to a sudden realization after answering and started to examine Kana intently. Kana placed her towel on her head, made a strange "oho—" sound, then leaned next to Fear, dipping herself chin deep into the water.

"Speaking of first times—Kana, this is also my first time having a bath together with you. Although I've seen you changing before, after confirming directly with my own eyes... Mmmhmm. I knew it. Not an enemy but not an ally either. No, we of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance will reach that level eventually, so you can be considered a future ally."

"I don't quite get what you're saying, but I can vaguely understand! Faced with an excessively powerful enemy, everyone needs to unite and find a way to defeat her!"

"That's right, that's right! Gwah—While we're talking, the rude planet of meat has descended! This impact will cause the healing hot water to overflow!"

"Heeee! I-I've caught sight of something astounding! ...It's floating! The rumors from the village turn out to be true! Amen amen!"

"Y-You two are making a big deal out of nothing! Also, Miyama-san, please stop worshiping me!"

Accompanied by evil sound effects of squishing—at least in Fear's mind—Konoha also lowered herself into the water of the open-air bath.

Fear and Kana were staring intently to observe the enemy forces. Although Fear was used to the sight already, when competing with Konoha directly in a naked state, the difference in levels was too great. Those were totally deadly weapons, things that should not exist in this world no matter how one reasoned. She was going to be killed. No, simply by unveiling these things, people must have died in the past. Because in fact, Kana was on the verge of death.

"Ahwuwu... Fear-chan, what should I do with this miserable feeling!? This despair from being forced to admit to a difference in femininity! As much as I'd like to try touching them, I think it'll deal me an even greater blow!"

"Calm down, you can surely reverse the situation by pouring our righteous anger into your hands when touching. They will be blown away, thus restoring balance and equality to all women in the world... This creation myth shall start now! I'll be in charge of the creature on one side so let's split the burden by half, let's kill one each!"

"P-Please stop this right now, it's too embarrassing! Everyone is here too!"

Konoha was wrapping her arms around her breasts and retreating to the depths of the bath, trying to escape from Fear and Kana's claws of evil.

"Don't think you can escape!" Just as the two girls approached like two crocodiles locking onto prey—

In the corners of their eyes, they caught sight of something brown appearing amidst the white steam. "Hmm?" The three girls turned to look.

"..."

Un Izoey was currently standing before the bath, staring sharply. She kept turning her head to look left and right. As soon as she noticed Fear and the

girls dipped in the hot water, she widened her eyes in surprise, staring at them intently to confirm if there was anything unusual. She was probably looking out for signs of people vomiting blood or suffering so much they had difficulty breathing. Having visited a public bath together with Un Izoey once in the past, Fear had a basic idea. Back then, Un Izoey had acted the same way. Her basic impression of "steaming pools" was quite different from the leisurely image harbored by the average Japanese person. If one were to ask her "what single word would you associate with this?" Rather than "hotspring" or "bath," she would most likely answer only a single word—"death."

"...Just to clarify, this is different from a certain cave in your homeland."

"Yes. This is not a spring of demons fuming with poisonous gas, so relax and have a dip."

Probably due to listening to Fear and Konoha or confirming with her own eyes that nothing was unusual, Un Izoey breathed out.

"I hear you. Of course I know, but I insist on my insistence to check first, after all, you only have one life to die. So..."

Un Izoey extended her dark-skinned legs into the bath water as though mustering her resolve then sat down next to Fear's group. Due to her posture with legs wide apart with one knee drawn up, the sight would have been quite frightening were it not for the slight murkiness of the hot water. She actually placed her towel on her head as instructed by Fear and the others earlier. With her arm leaning against her drawn-up knee, her overall posture was like a middle-aged man's.

"Izo-chan is really so cool... An athletic build without any excess fat at all, slim and trim, I admire you so much!"

Fear could understand what Kana was talking about. She was also stealing glances at Un Izoey's body—a body covered with supple muscles yet with slender shoulders and long, slim legs. However, Fear could not accept the pair of breasts that were equivalent to enemy forces. A mid-level boss of a different color.

"Hey hey, I've already asked many times, but do you wanna join the swimming club?"

"I am good at holding my breath but not skilled at swimming fast. No matter how fast I swim, I cannot win against sukunaki, besides, catching them needs patience not speed..."

While listening inattentively to their conversation, Fear discovered that someone new had entered the bath without them noticing. More accurately, the number of new enemies has increased again. However, she was not a student.

"Excuse me. I believe that I should make good use of this opportunity. Having contact with students is a good thing and should contribute to the learning space of the classroom henceforth, resulting in greater harmony."

"Oh it's you, Sensei."

Kaidou. With a serious expression and eyes closed, her face was stiff while she crossed her arms. However, this did not mean she was in a bad mood. Instead, she breathed out slowly in enjoyment.

"Is Sagisaki-sensei coming together with you?"

Hearing Konoha's question, Kaidou opened her eyes slightly and answered:

"She already collapsed from exhaustion and is resting in her room."

"Ah... She looked quite tired on the bus to Kyoto. Does she get motion sickness easily?"

"Cow Tits, I don't think that's the only reason. I only caught a glimpse, but she was already exhausted and walking unsteadily back in Nara Park. She probably lacks basic stamina."

"Yes. I remember too. I also saw a number of tourists fainting in the park and sent to the hospital. It was probably heat stroke. People often get too excited and emotional at tourist spots, so you should all take care."

Kaidou gave advice that was extremely in a teacher's style. In sync with her voice, the two bulges wobbled while resting on her crossed arms. This was the full form of the objects that were almost spilling out of the dangerous swimsuit last time when they visited a water park.

Probably intimidated by their presence, Kana was attracted over.

"Ahhh... Sensei! What an adult body...!"

"You are Miyama, I see. What is the matter?"

"What 'what is the matter'!? I am very interested in that part of your body, Sensei! Because my difference with Konoha-chan is a work in progress, I can pretend to ignore it, but since you're an adult, Sensei, it represents the future! A future filled with hope! Maybe many years from now, I might turn out like this... Something like that!"

"Oh...? I do not quite understand, but if you are interested, be my guest."

Kaidou unfolded her arms, straightened her back and presented that completely unguarded towards Kana, then said:

"Do as you wish."

Fear had almost forgotten, but this was the kind of person Kaidou was. Missing common sense in certain areas, or had Kaidou completely forgotten the sense of shame that everyone was supposed to have?

"Eh? No, umm... No way, are you serious...? But if the teacher says go ahead, it'd be rude if I don't comply, right...? Cough cough. Uh, well then, please excuse the unworthy Miyama Kana."

She grabbed them. Grope. Grope.

"Mmm... Hu, ha."

"What's this—such elasticity... So soft..."

"...By the way, a dip in a hot bath is really splendid... I also... nnn! It has been a long time... an open-air bath... Ah."

Konoha narrowed her eyes while watching this scene and murmured:

"Uh... Sensei, do you happen to have some kind of personal principle where you insist on speaking normally while being groped...? It looks almost like some kind of single-player punishment game."

"Hmm, why is Kana groping with such focus as well...? What a mystery."

Fear also whispered quietly then suddenly realized—

Kana was completely immersed in her task. Perhaps there was some kind of secret there. Perhaps unlike Cow Tits' boobs which were merely cow udders, some kind of profound evolutionary secret hidden might be hidden there. Perhaps Kana was close to mastering that secret. In that case, as

the leader of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance, she must not miss out on this excellent opportunity...

Hence, Fear was drawn over to Kaidou as well, making her way there unsteadily. The instant just as she was about to reach out—

"There are perverts here."

"Hyoh? Oh, I accidentally lost myself there... Sensei, thank you very much!"

"Hmm... Cough. Hmm. If there is anything you still do not understand, feel free to come again."

A voice of absolute zero temperature prompted Kana and Fear to regain their sanity. Fear turned her head to look.

"Hinata, I have a suggestion. Let us use the indoor bath instead, because perverted elements seem to be surging forth nonstop here."

"I don't really understand, but we're already here! It's a rare chance so we really should take a dip in the open-air bath... Ah! Please don't turn around suddenly, I can't see anything after taking off my glasses! I'll fall and die. I can only rely on you, Sakuramairi-san!"

"Hyah! I-I get it, so stop clinging to me! Seriously, you can clearly do as that bespectacled girl over there and enter the bath with your glasses..."

Shiraho grumbled while entering the bath with Hinata who was holding her waist.

"What are you looking at? I'll slaughter you!"

"No I was just thinking that it's rare to see you naked—Hmm..."

Quite rare indeed. Shiraho turned her gaze away in embarrassment and even used Hinata as a shield, how underhanded. Immersed in the hot bath water, it was still faintly visible. Shiraho's naked body. Portions of skin never seen before. Wow, so the curves there turned out to be like this. So there was a mole at that kind of spot.

"Hey Fear-chan, my resentment towards the gods' unfairness seems to be endless today—Too unfair. With a flawlessly beautiful face already, what's up with this perfect figure as well...?"

"There's no point complaining to me. But I do know that Shiraho's naked body is very rare and highly valuable. If you feel like doing anything, you'd be better do it now because her rarity is probably even higher than the teacher's."

"Th-Then I'll have to try even harder than when when doing the teacher's! May I? May I grope and rub my face against Shiraho-chan's that to absorb the essence!? Oh Kana-san, you're suddenly getting so excited!"

"Of course you may not! I knew it, the acquaintances of that perverted male rapist are all perverts themselves!"

"Then going by what you've said, you're a pervert as well."

"! ...Whatever. Hinata, please serve as my shield more faithfully. In times like these, your personality as an ordinary person is the most reliable. Okay, hurry and say something to these perverts now."

"Hmm—Sakuramairi-san's essence is totally mine."

"Hold on! Why did your role suddenly change!?"

While the girls were in a clamor—

"You girls. It is fine that you wish to deepen relationships between one another, but this is getting too noisy. Please enjoy the bath more quietly. You ought to silently close your eyes, experience the warmth, savor the cool breeze, smell the steam—I do believe that this is the proper method to enjoy an open-air bath."

Being the one who allowed a student to grope your breasts, you have no right to say that. Surely everyone was thinking that, but no one voiced their thoughts.

Naturally, this was because Kaidou had grabbed her metal shovel from the side of the bath matter-of-factly.

"Uh... S-Sensei...?"

"Kana, don't worry."

As Kana's face twitched, Fear reassured her. Because Fear had asked in the past already.

"I heard that it's waterproof."

Part 6

Meanwhile, Haruaki and the other boys were also enjoying an open-air bath. Naturally, things were not as coincidental as depicted in manga with a large hole in the partitioning near the top. Besides, the male bath was not connected directly to the female bath in the first place. However—due to the water source location, it was indeed true that the two baths were in close proximity and both open-air baths offered views of the same sky above. Consequently, it was possible to hear voices from the female bath if the girls were noisy. At the same time, those present on this side were all extremely ordinary, healthy high school boys. Were the male and female open-air baths actually separated by crude partitioning like those depicted in manga, these boys would surely declare with serious looks on their faces: "Not climbing up there would be rude instead!" Then putting their thoughts into action, they would proceed to push over the partitioning and create a huge commotion.

As a result, all the boys were glaring at Haruaki.

"W-Why!? What's with you guys?"

"How should I put this... I really can't accept it..."

"Today's resentment towards the gods' unfairness is truly endless, Miyama is right. Arghh, even if it's the voice of that shorty Miyama, as soon as I'm reminded that she's currently completely naked, I feel... I feel..."

"Haruaki, can you understand? How we yearn and thirst for contact with girls every single day? Even if they didn't do anything, images of Fear-chan groping Konoha-san's b-b-b-breasts still surface uncontrollably! ...Wee! Hic!"

While speaking, Taizou picked up a bottle from a tray and took a gulp. Although he burped, this was not beer but actually cola that Taizou and the boys had brought in without permission, saying they wanted to experience the mood.

"So how did things turn to glaring at me...?"

"Because we discovered now! Contact with girls! Sounds of kyah kyah ufufu! These heart pounding experiences that we desire so very much right now to savor carefully, yet there's an extremely enviable guy here who's already digested all such events into ordinary everyday life!"

"That's right! There's a withered old bastard here who's leisurely sitting back in contentment, the only one who's completely unexcited about noises made by completely naked girls!"

"So just one look at him and I suddenly realized how fortunate the life this guy enjoys on a daily basis! A lucky bastard that's lighting fires of wrath at this point in time!"

"Uh, even if you guys say that..."

"See! You're brushing the matter aside in a matter-of-fact manner again! Damn you! Boss! Another drink!" Saying that, the classmates, Animori and Murasawa, began to take swigs of cola from the tray. Because Taizou handed the last bottle of cola to Haruaki, Haruaki took it, thanked him: "Oh thanks" and started drinking cola as well. Taizou was a true friend indeed, preparing Haruaki's share without needing him to say anything beforehand—Just as Haruaki was thinking that...

"...You drank it, right? I didn't say it was for free, you know? You drank it, right?"

"Pfffft! ...C-Cough! W-What?"

Taizou's eyes glimmered slyly while he was speaking. Animori and Murasawa also chimed in:

"Yachi, pay the price. Perfect timing. Could you tell us the answers we've been itching to find out for the longest time—having known you from before, Taizou might know already—but we only met you after entering high school. Related to our grievances just now, we are very interested in your daily life!"

"That's right! To think you can live under the same roof with Fear-chan and the others... How many heart pounding events actually happen each day? If it's on the level of twice or more a day, I'm gonna start drafting plans for a perfect crime right now!"

"H-How could something like that possibly happen!?"

To be honest, the true answer was that even if events of that sort happened, Haruaki would try to forget them as quickly as possible so they were impossible to count. However, there existed instants when lying was permissible—Probably, if to protect his own life and avoid falling victim to the perfect crime.

"Uh—Well, how do you guys handle the laundry? Will things that shine golden and dazzling in our eyes fall to the floor on occasion, or when drying the laundry..."

"Lemme think... The laundry in the changing area is separated into two baskets to begin with. One of them being a domain where I absolutely never trespass. Furthermore, it has a lid on top so the contents cannot be seen. Konoha and Kuroe are exclusively responsible for washing that basket's laundry, which is then hung to dry at the exclusive drying area on the accessory dwelling's second floor, so I don't see anything throughout the entire process..."

"But there must be once or twice when clothing hung out to dry was blown down by the wind."

"No, like I said, the girls are very careful in this area..."

But no matter how careful, it was impossible to prevent all accidents—Nevertheless, Haruaki benevolently covered it up with white lies.

For quite a while, Haruaki tried his best to continue explaining his daily life: "Extremely ordinary, there's nothing particularly interesting. Those things you imagine don't actually happen." Finally he managed to quell the boys' curiosity as spectators. But during a school excursion, a space like the male bath intrinsically harbored a unique type of exciting atmosphere that was impossible to dispel completely. Taizou lowered his voice and said:

"By the way, Haruaki, you should be more aware of how blessed you are."

Right, Kuroe had also said something similar during the school beauty pageant. Haruaki recalled.

"That's right, that's right. The girls surrounding you are all so high in quality. Who knows how many boys want to approach them... But we are quite lucky to be classmates with them too."

"To the point that there are even people who want us to help make introductions just because we're in the same class. Fear-chan is so glittering and extremely petite, that's so cute. She keeps moving about like a small animal and looks so full of energy and capable of charging fearlessly ahead any time."

The boys proceeded to rate the rest of the girls:

Konoha was a goddess, her smiling face full of tender love while her figure was extremely pleasing to the eye. Kirika was both serious-minded and pretty, the type of girl who would be extremely loyal and devoted once she became smitten with someone. Also, the fact that she prepared her own lunchbox every day was an unexpected bonus, implying great cooking and domestic skills. Shiraho needed no mentioning at all, possessing beauty of the highest pinnacle while her haughtiness itself was also quite captivating. Un Izoey's bizarre, exotic, foreign flair was also great, instilling a desire to teach her many things as though facing a blank slate. Furthermore, Haruaki's luck with women outside of the class was also quite unfair. Not only were there the secretary and maid of the superintendent's office but also Kuroe at home—

"..."

Smiling while watching Taizou and the boys discuss the girls, Haruaki experienced quite unbelievable feelings. These were extremely complicated feelings—a certain type of feelings resembling anxiety, shyness, embarrassment, pride, uneasiness, superiority, displeasure, bliss, loneliness, all-encompassing yet not entirely inclusive, mixed with all sorts of emotions.

Due to feeling an unbearable itch in the very depths of his heart, Haruaki stopped thinking, resting his back against the bath's edge while leaning his head back to look upwards.

The carefree steam was drifting into the vast sky overhead.

Lingering in his heart was merely the vacuous question of whether Fear and the girls were currently watching the same sky.

Part 7

After a bath—

Seeing the sight before him, Haruaki decided he would rather die than mention it to others.

"Ah! ...Hoo... Ooh... That kind of place... My confession: the fact that this is a first experience—Ah! Hoo! M-Mmm a-a-ahhh—"

"It feels that nice?"

"My answer: yes... No, there's still not enough evidence to judge, it's just that this feeling is very unknown—A-Ah!"

"This is a device invented only for the purpose of bringing pleasure to people. So don't be shy and embrace it with open arms. Just close your eyes, like what I'm doing... Ahhh, mmm, as expected, I find it the more forceful the better."

"What, if this force is continued... I-It seems like I'm about to break... Ahhh... Ahhhhhhh—"

Un Izoey had her four limbs extended straight, all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes, her skin was bright red, her hair was scattered loosely, even drool seemed to be dripping slightly. Her entire body was trembling as though saying she could withstand no longer.

...Sitting on a massage chair.

She was probably quite ticklish. Or perhaps the experience of getting gripped and massaged by a machine—actually quite a strange experience on further thought—was intrinsically tugging away at her heartstrings. As a side note, the person replying to her was Kaidou-sensei who was lying on the neighboring massage chair. The teacher was dressed in a bathrobe while Un Izoey was wearing a bathrobe over her upper body with her navel exposed as always with the usual tribal skirt on her lower body. In other words, there were unguarded openings all over the place, plus the fact she was twisting her body under such conditions, Haruaki had great difficulty deciding where to direct his gaze appropriately.

"..."

Without saying a word, Haruaki turned around and went back the way he arrived, joining up with Taizou again after having just parted ways.

"Eh? Haruaki, weren't you going for a massage? Just like an old man."

"Don't call me an old man. I was just thinking that having a go on a massage chair would be nice since it's not every day that there's this kind of chance... But both chairs are currently being used."

"Oh okay, then never mind that for now. Let's chat here for a bit longer. It feels such a waste if we go back to the room straight away."

Because the hotel was almost completely booked by Taishyuu High, even the lobby was packed with students and very lively. Consequently, while Haruaki and the boys were looking for a place to sit down and chat—

"Muu. It's the shameless brat."

"Ah, Haruaki-kun, did you enjoy your bath?"

"Oh.. Sure."

Fear and the girls were sitting in some chairs at a resting area in a corner of the lobby, chatting quite happily. Presumably having just taken a bath as well, Fear, Konoha and Kana were dressed in yukatas. Haruaki could see the skin of Konoha's neck, bright red from the hot bath water. Fear was waving her collar, openly fanning wind towards her chest. Haruaki felt as though he could hear Taizou and the boys gulping behind him. But at this moment, Kirika suddenly appeared, blocking their view of Fear and the girls.

"...Absolutely ridiculous, what are you looking at?"

"N-No, nothing! Uh... We just want to take a break but there are no other seats! So I was wondering if you girls will allow us to sit here for a while!"

Only Kirika was dressed in a tracksuit, faced with her difficult circumstances as usual. In most likelihood, she could not possibly have bathed together with Fear and the others, so she must have met up afterwards.

Haruaki and the boys spoke as though trying to explain and defend themselves while sitting down at the same table as Fear and the girls. Next, just as Haruaki exhaled deeply, Taizou's vigorous voice suddenly sounded over the table:

"Excellent—! I've been waiting all along for this break time! Let's play cards together!"

"Eh?"

Just as Taizou announced, he drew out a box of playing cards from the sleeve of his yukata. Since they had not returned to their rooms after taking a bath, it meant that he must have carried it all along.

Presumably noticing Haruaki's gaze, Taizou smiled malevolently and whispered in his ear:

"Kukuku, Haruaki, you must be thinking: why in this kind of place? This is only the preparation stage. My ultimate goal is to play cards in the girls' rooms, thereby leading to a conversation party. But for us who are unpopular, suddenly jumping to that step is a bit too hard. The girls will surely get wary instantly. So things have to start like this first to lower their guard. After all, there are still two nights remaining on this trip after tonight...!"



Despite Haruaki clearly not asking him, Taizou decided on his own to reveal this plan that Haruaki had no idea whether to call it ambitious or puny. If only Taizou could apply this sort of effort and dedication towards other things—Haruaki thought to himself.

In any case, it was not a bad method of killing time casually during the nighttime.

"Hohou. During the journey thus far, I've already survived countless deathmatches and leveled up immensely. You still dare challenge me, Taizou...?"

"Hehe, I'll feel quite troubled if you make light of the dynamic vision and running ability I've honed during my time in the baseball club!"

Neither of these abilities were applicable towards playing cards, right? Or was Haruaki mistaken?

"Yeah, the more the merrier. Class Rep, Kana, K-Konoha-san, let's all play together!"

"You have a point. Very well, after all there's nothing else to do."

"No helping it. Y-Yachi, surely you guys are playing together too, right? In that case, let's do this as boys versus girls. In any case, we're not going to lose."

Alright alright—While everyone was clamoring, someone began to deal out cards and a game of old maid began as a warmup. Spontaneously, the group decided on a special rule just for the first game, namely, that the last two players to finish would have to act as lackeys to go buy drinks for everyone.

As a result—

"Umuu—That's weird. I've already mastered the art of bluffing perfectly, I can't possibly have lost."

"...Because every time you use that move, it ends up being a safe card to pick whenever you make a worried expression. That's why I think Konoha-san and the rest are using it to their advantage. Apart from that, there's still the issue of luck."

"What did you say!? Damn Cow Tits! I knew it, you're truly impossible to surpass in the domain of twisted personalities! Those boobs of yours better turn ugly and twisted as well! As twisted as those twist bread!"

Haruaki and Fear left the table where the group was gathered and set off together to buy drinks. First they went to the vending machine closest to the lobby but there were many students waiting in line already. Perhaps they were sent on errands just like Haruaki and Fear for many of them were carrying multiple cans at once.

"Looks like it'll take some time even if we line up..."

"I remember there's also a vending machine over at the dining hall, right? Although it's a bit far, there should be fewer crowds than here."

"Considering the time, it'll probably be faster. Let's go."

Hence, Fear and Haruaki walked together along the soft carpet covering the walkway. The dining hall was located on the other end of the building. Due to its slightly remote location, the trip was like a short-distance stroll.

Naturally, there were no student rooms on the first floor. However, despite no seating provided, there were still isolated signs of students. And the majority of them being pairs of boys and girls.

These boys and girls were either gazing into each other's eyes at close range or leaning shoulder to shoulder, chatting with bliss all over their faces.

What were they chatting about?

Why were they smiling while looking at each other with such bliss written on their faces?

(Hmm... I guess I can understand. They must be... couples.)

When passing by, Fear glanced sideways at a couple. As a result, the couple glanced back in turn at Fear and Haruaki. At this moment, Fear came to a revelation with sudden surprise.

These two people are a pair, a boy and a girl.

Right now, she and Haruaki were also a pair, a boy and a girl.

She could not help but think, how did the other side see them? How did this pair of lovers see them as they walked through the depths of this deserted part of the building?

It felt like they were gazing back with pleased looking eyes. Was Fear overthinking things? The couples' eyes seemed to be encouraging her and Haruaki: "Comrades spotted. We hope you'll be able to share happy times together too." Was this an illusion?

For some reason, her heart began to quicken unbelievably. She began to feel very aware of Haruaki walking beside her.

"Hey Fear, do you know how to get to the dining hall? I'm actually not too confident."

"Hyohouh!? W-What? How do we get there? Well... Um, oh right! There's a direction board, so it'll be totally clear if we go over to have a look! Come this way!"

"...?"

Due to Haruaki suddenly calling out to her, Fear jumped greatly in surprise. She went with the flow to cover it up. After using the direction board to confirm the path to the dining hall, she advanced along the corridor again. Due to the possibility that her heart would race even faster if she stayed beside Haruaki, Fear quickened her pace to walk in front of him. Then the deeper they entered the building, the fewer the signs of other people. But just as Fear was about to turn a certain corner all at once, she found figures standing in the corridor ahead.

(What...!?)

Another couple.

But this time, this couple was not chatting with sweet intimacy. They were not conversing at all.

The two of them were simply engaged in a certain activity without saying a word.

Namely, smooch—Their lips pressed together.

"Ha, owawa...!"

Fear frantically turned around, pressed herself against the wall and hid behind the corner. Then she firmly blocked Haruaki who had not reached the corner yet. You may not pass!

"What's wrong? Why... Mmmmmffff."

"D-Don't make a sound! You'll be discovered!"

Fear covered Haruaki's mouth with her hand and muttered softly in his ear. Haruaki did not realize what had happened because he had not witnessed the scene behind the corner. Despite displaying troubled eyes, he still raised his arms high to surrender obediently first. Surrendering completely despite clearly not knowing the entire situation, this guy was adhering to his philosophy of non-resistance too thoroughly.

Fear exhaled deeply then once again peeked past the corner, keeping her hand on Haruaki's mouth, slowly turning her upper body and only leaning her head forward. She could see it. Still kissing. Smooch—smooch—

(Th-That's truly too shameless...!)

Fear's face instantly went flush red. What the heck are these two doing? I can't believe they're doing it in this kind of place at this kind of time. No, it's exactly because of this kind of time, right? I think I've heard some classmate say school excursions are magical in a certain way, catalyzing the formation of romantic relationships between people. Two people spending nights together. Indeed, it was a very rare experience for ordinary couples. But what about me and him—?

"Mmmfff... Fear...?"

Fear suddenly had another sudden realization. Due to using her entire body to pin down Haruaki, she could feel the sensation of his chest together with his body warmth. At a distance closer than normal. Clearly much closer. Also, his breathing was blowing against her hand that was placed against his mouth. His lips were on her palm. Lips that were used during kissing. No, not only that, the thing that was slightly touching her fingers, wasn't it his tongue? In other words, he had licked her finger. Contact between finger and tongue. Contact between palm and lips.

(Ah...)

Fear suddenly remembered at this time.

Haruaki's lips. Indeed, his lips had touched her before. Although not when she was in human form, it did happen for sure. It should be back when the cultural festival ended.

She remembered. No, she had never forgotten, she could not forget—That sensation.

The sensation when Haruaki's lips and her body had overlapped each other was a very blissful memory.

However—Fear continued to ponder deeply.

(If it happened like what these two are doing now... Kissed on the lips, is the feeling different...?)

At this moment, Fear suddenly regained her senses. Shaking her head repeatedly, she chastised herself: I-Idiot! What am I thinking? This is truly too shameless!

I must be getting infected with shamelessness because of seeing these shameless people. How troubling, I must get away from here as quickly as possible!

"L-Listen, this path can't be taken any further. Let's find another route. Turn back now!"

"Eh? Why?"

"No 'why'! Just pretend that this path is already completely contaminated with deadly poison gas!"

Fear muttered quietly again, pushing Haruaki's back forcefully to direct him towards the path where they had come from.

Forget it, hurry and forget those things quickly. Fear found herself rather unsettled today. Her emotions were easily agitated for no particular reason, she was blushing or imagining weird things while her heart was racing in response to trivial matters.

Seriously, how did things come to this?

Taking advantage of the fact that Haruaki's back was facing her, Fear secretly used one hand to rub her reddened cheek.

Could this be what was meant by the magic of the school excursion?

After taking a roundabout detour (although Haruaki still had no idea why they must take the long route), the two of them arrived at the vending machine in front of the dining hall. Having bought drinks for eight people, Haruaki and Fear divided them evenly, intending to carry four cans of beverages each, however—

"H-Hoooooooooooo..."

"Oh~ You don't have to strain yourself to carry them. Look, you're trembling all over."

Haruaki's method was very simple, basically using his fingers to clamp two cans in each hand. However, it still seemed to be too much of a stretch even when Fear forcibly tried to spread her fingertips. Such tiny hands—Haruaki marveled at the discovery.

"D-Don't you worry, I can do it!"

"These are carbonated drinks. The consequences are very serious if you drop them."

"Like I said, you don't need to worry! Besides, even if I drop one, it'll be Taizou's portion, so it shouldn't matter."

"That's a totally terrible thing to say. Oh yeah, you don't have to hold them in your hands. Just cradle them against your chest like this and it should be fine."

"What? What did you just say? What about my chest!? Are you trying to say that there's no obstacle because my chest is very flat, so I'll be able to maintain balance!? I-I'll curse you!"

"I didn't say that at all! Your persecution mania must be making you imagine hearing things!"

Fear ended up holding a can in each hand while clamping the remaining two with her arms. Then they started walking back.

After a while, Fear suddenly stopped when they reached a location that was still a small distance away from the lobby. They were next to the hotel's souvenir shop. She had discovered a certain something there.

"Hey Haruaki. First reason... We're going to have a beverage party in the lobby next. But don't you find it a little unfulfilled if all we do is play cards while drinking beverages?"

"..."

"Second reason is we took the detour and made them wait a long time. As an apology, we should add an extra gift in addition to the drinks, right?"

Seeing Fear's large, bright eyes that had locked onto her prey, Haruaki sighed. He knew that raising any objections would be futile by this point.

"Sigh... Since you'll surely bring up even more forced reasons next. Yeah yeah I got it. Hurry up and pick one, otherwise it'll be meaningless if you spend too much time here. Also, pay for it yourself..."

"Yahoo—!"

Without waiting for Haruaki to finish, Fear had already charged headlong into the souvenir shop. Naturally, there was a small poster stuck in this area—"All sorts of local rice crackers! Please bring Japanese-style greetings back home!" Fear tilted herself forward, casting her burning gaze over the countless rice crackers laid out before her eyes.

"Let me be clear, you're only allowed to pick one type. After all, we still need to buy souvenirs later."

"I know, I know, okay!? Fufufu, these are all rice crackers I've never seen before, what a treasure trove...! Which should I pick? Should I buy one type as a taste test to confirm if it's suitable to bring home as a gift? Or should I pick from the special flavors in an experimental manner? The tradeoff is between prioritizing satisfaction level and the number of rice cracker types I try out during the trip! This is such a huge dilemma, I'm already facing a monumental dilemma on the first day of the trip!"

"That's exactly why I said you'll make everyone wait even longer if you agonize like this."

Haruaki reminded quietly while smiling wryly but Fear was not listening, of course. She simply picked up and put down rice cracker packets one after another, completely engrossed in the selection process. "Pick this one? No, this one? This one's hard to give up too—"

Haruaki knew this was going to happen from the start. Having snacks to go with the drinks was not a bad thing, in fact, it was only natural. Fear also looked like she was in a very blissful state. Now that things had gotten to this, he had no way to stop her either. Of course, he would urge her as

much as possible, but there would be no choice but to apologize properly to everyone else about their extreme tardiness when they got back.

However, simply urging Fear to hurry was not going to help. Haruaki allowed his gaze to leave Fear for now and surveyed his surroundings. Although it was only the first day of the trip, there were still many students in the souvenir shop apart from Haruaki and Fear, probably killing time or trying to check out what was available first. There were single-sex groups as well as quite a few couples. They were either looking at the key chains harmoniously, pointing at bizarre toys and laughing loudly together or picking t-shirts. "If you're going to buy one, which one will you pick?" Even as someone unrelated, Haruaki still felt inexplicably embarrassed by these scenes, although he did not find it unpleasant at all.

(Hmm... I guess it's because we're on a school excursion.)

Despite keeping things secret in school, couples would become bold enough to flirt openly in front of others during school excursions... In other words, different rules were at work when under an environment different from normal! "This is the magic of the school excursion! I want to achieve the same as those people too!" Haruaki recalled what Taizou had mentioned before. Just at this moment—

"Hey hey Haruaki! Which type do you wanna eat!? This Kyoto-style mustard rice cracker? Or this Kansai-exclusive takoyaki-flavored rice cracker? I'm having a difficult time choosing between these two, whaddya say?"

Hugging the drinks in her bosom that were about to fall, Fear turned her head back at once to ask Haruaki. She picked up the bags of rice crackers in sequence, tilting her head as though saying she was seriously agonizing over the decision.

Haruaki smiled wryly again—this time suddenly noticing gazes coming from other couples. Somehow it felt as though... the kind of gaze that was regarding Fear and Haruaki as comrades. At the same time, it also seemed that the gazes Haruaki had given them earlier were being returned to him in kind.

(Ooh...)

How did these couples view them? He was alone with Fear right now, standing aside while watching Fear choose rice crackers. Occasionally, she would seek his opinion to compare choices. Haruaki smiled wryly.

(W-Woah... This... somehow feels a bit... should I say, embarrassing...!?)

Haruaki shook his head lightly in order to cover up the wavering produced in his heart. He answered Fear:

"L-Looks like they're both very tasty. Anyway, you hurry up and decided...!"

"Saying they're both good is the kind of answer that causes the most problems. Hmm... Hold on, these deep-fried rice look very tasty too! How troubling..."

Without noticing what Haruaki was feeling, Fear turned to the long row of rice crackers again.

Haruaki could feel his slightly fast heart rate and found himself exceptionally bothered by surrounding gazes. Being alone with Fear like this was making him feel a bit embarrassed—In all sorts of ways, he felt that his mind was delicately off-balance today.

Seriously, how did things come to this?

Taking advantage of the fact that Fear's back was facing him, Haruaki secretly used one hand to rub his reddened cheek.

No way—Haruaki thought, could this be what was known as the magic of the school excursion?

Part 8

Without needing Kirika to issue orders as the class representative, all the roommates obediently went into sleep mode the moment it was time for lights out.

"Okay, now that we've eaten rice crackers and played cards, I have no regrets today! Let's sleep! Mufufu, sleeping like this with our futons lined in a row like this, it feels so much like a training camp. It reminds me of the the time when we stayed over in the school's night watchman's room—mmffffmmfff"

"Night watchman's room...?"

"N-No, it's nothing, Miyama-san. Ohohoho. Okay, let us sleep quickly so that we will be able to have as much fun as possible tomorrow!"

"Y-Yeah. If we end up exhausted from staying up at night, it'll be truly and absolutely ridiculous."

Naturally, it was not possible for the group to fall asleep immediately. To accommodate Kana's excited spirits, Kirika and Fear chatted casually for quite a while. Although it was very fun, Fear soon fell asleep after that, bringing a natural conclusion to the conversation party. Kana muttered "it's just the first day, so there's still plenty of time for that traditional battle..." and groped her pillow as though to confirm its rigidity. How inauspicious.

Then the next day, everyone got up at the appointed time, rubbing their eyes while they ate breakfast and set off for the sightseeing destination of this day's itinerary, namely, Kyoto.

Kirika was working hard to be proactive.

"Y-Yachi! This is just to remember the trip with absolutely no other significance! Let's take a photo together with the Temple of the Golden Pavilion as the background!"

Using a World Heritage Site as cover to take a photo of just the two of them. This was so cliched. Rather, a tried and true attack.

"Oh of course. I actually wanted to borrow Kuroe's digital camera but ended up forgetting. I was just thinking that a cellphone photo would be kind of unfulfilling. Uh, what about the others—"

"L-Let's take one with just the two of us first, yes! It's also a chance to test out my digital camera to see if there are any problems! Okay, Kana, I'm counting on you!"

"OK!"

Kirika swiftly leaned close to Haruaki and looked up to glance at the profile of his face, saving the image into the most important folder in the memory of her mind. Of course a photo together as a pair was important, but this was very important too.

After the photo was taken, accompanied by the shutter sound, Kirika checked the LCD screen to confirm, finding a photo of herself looking tense and Haruaki looking shy (increasing her treasures by one). At this moment, Konoha quickly came forward. Thinking "Sorry, the competitive world is this merciless" to herself, Kirika separated naturally from Haruaki. She had no right to monopolize him. No one did. Was this way of thinking

too naive? But at the very minimum, she did not want to do anything that would tarnish her own honor.

"Tsk! How careless of me! ...Uh ...I'd like to test my camera too! Haruaki-kun, please join me in a photo as well!"

"Sure, of course. But I was just thinking, even if it's just for testing, you could include the others. Just take the photo again when necessary—"

"Don't mind the trivial details, that would be too rude to the Temple of the Golden Pavilion!"

"But the Temple isn't gonna complain."

"Come, Miyama-san, please take my camera as well!"

"Ready any time—I'm going to take the photo now! Say cheese..."

"Hey hey Haruaki, did you see that!? It's so golden and shiny it's unbelievable! I thought it was really tasteless but after making one round around it, I actually find it very tasteful now!"

Within the viewfinder, a silver little head suddenly squeezed itself between the Haruaki and Konoha. The shutter button was then pressed.

"Excuse me, Fear-san—! I demand a re-take!"

"Muu, you're always so noisy, Cow Tits. Why don't you take the Temple of the Golden Pavilion as your role model and paint your tasteless and vulgar body gold as well? Perhaps it'll look a lot classier after I circle around you once. But according to my predictions, it'll probably still remain a tragic sight to behold, serving to remind everyone of the truth of the galaxy that your existence itself is so terrible that nothing can be done to erase it."

The current location was next to the Mirror Pond, supposedly the best location to get a clear view of the Golden Pavilion. Students were essentially still moving around in their homeroom classes as a unit, but due to the machinations of some unknown person, Fear's and Haruaki's groups naturally moved together. In other words, there were other boys present apart from Haruaki.

"Grrrrr, it's only Haruaki again..."

"The plan for my perfect crime is already 60% complete. Listen carefully, the first step is to throw Yachi into a completely sealed room with neither windows nor doors, then—"

"That sounds like it'll be quite a pain just to throw him inside. Hey, isn't it easier to just kill him directly in the first place?"

"What a great idea! You're truly a genius!"

"G-Guys, stop discussing something so scary! Argh, jeez, this is so incomprehensible, but anyway, everyone please gather for a commemorative photo! Gather up, gather up!"

"I will gladly comply! As long as I can get a copy of the group photo afterwards, all will be forgiven!"

Despite being quite astounded by the bizarre excitement exhibited by Taizou and the boys, Kirika still joined them for a photo of the two groups combined. The person helping to take the photo was Kaidou-sensei. In a different sense compared to the previous, this photo was also one of Kirika's treasures.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion was not the only destination in the second day's morning itinerary. They still had to take a bus to tour the northwestern outskirts of Kyoto. The next stop was Ryouan-ji, the Temple of the Dragon at Peace, greatly renowned for its Zen garden. Standing in a row before the rock garden, the group experienced the dry landscape.

"...Haruaki, can I say something honest? This is really boring."

"Isn't that the point? Yeah—It calms the soul. Isn't this what's meant by attaining the state of Zen?"

A withered old man as always—Kirika laughed wryly to herself in secret. That said, likewise experiencing serenity and bliss simply by sitting beside him, perhaps she was calling the kettle black.

Fear looked over the rock garden, apparently unable to understand it, commenting quietly:

"But this garden is so empty... In comparison, our garden at home feels much more comfortable and natural."

"That is such a lack of manners afforded to a World Heritage Site. However, seeing as elegance and refinement have nothing to do with you, this is only to be expected."

"What are you talking about!? Then lemme ask you, what exactly is the meaning behind these rocks that seem randomly placed to me? Talking about elegance so smugly, you should have no trouble answering something so trivial, right?"

"Ooh! Well..."

"Hmph... As much as I'd like to gloat over my victory, the lack of an answer is really making me curious. Let's ask Kirika in a time like this."

"There are numerous interpretations regarding the rocks. Some say that it depicts a scene of a tigress crossing a river while carrying her cub. Others say since only fourteen of the fifteen boulders can be seen from any angle at a time, this is a teaching the world to accept imperfection and incompleteness... I suppose the viewer is meant to decide for themselves."

"That's too deep for me. But unfortunately, all I see is 'rocks on some sand.' Then what does it look like to you, Kirika?"

Kirika stared intently at the rock garden before her and came to a conclusion:

"...Sorry but I think it's just 'rocks on some sand' as well. Looks like I still have far to go since I haven't attained a level capable of seeing other meanings."

"Pffft... Hohoho."

"H-Hey! Laughing is not allowed, Yachi! It's not like I can help it!"

"What a rude shameless brat! Don't worry, Kirika, I'll teach him a lesson for you!"

Haruaki casually blocked Fear's relentless flurry of karate chops and said:

"Sorry Class Rep but I jumped the gun and was hoping you'd have some kind of interpretation, yet the result was quite unexpected..."

"Seriously... A-Absolutely ridiculous..."

Kirika pouted slightly and turned her gaze forward to cover up her substantial embarrassment.

Gazing at the space of the dry landscape where time seemed to have stopped, she experienced the heat in her chest and the speed of her heart beats. If someone were to ask her what she saw in this world of desolate rock and sand, her current answer would be nothing at all, apart from his childish, laughing face.

The next destination was the temple of Ninna-ji. One could call this a triple dose of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Although Ninna-ji did not possess particularly magnificent buildings, its vast grounds included many tourist spots that exemplified Kyoto style, such as the Golden Hall, the Pagoda, the Omuro cherry blossom trees, the Reihoukan museum's cultural treasures display. They leisurely toured all of these sights in turn.

During this time, Kirika suddenly thought of something. While trying hard to talk to him intentionally, walking naturally by his side, laughing and spending a happy time together, she thought of something.

Although utterly hopeless and matter-of-fact, it was something she only realized now.

(Ah... All things said, I really do... love him.)

Having grown accustomed a long time ago to a daily life of deceiving herself and others, she had always harbored feelings in her heart that she considered "matter-of-fact," to the point that she tended to forget its special qualities—But now she was experiencing them concretely.

"...Class Rep, what's wrong?"

"N-No, nothing. Uh... I-I was just thinking it's almost the gathering time!"

She had clearly spaced out for only an instant, but Haruaki was suddenly worried and observant. Damn it! His kindness was truly too keen and sensitive. That was precisely why she had fallen in love with him so much—

To such an extent that even she was at an utter loss as to what to do.

After visiting Ninna-ji, each homeroom class left to head to the respective restaurants they had booked in advance. Haruaki and friends took a bus and finally reached a large, two-story building. The place could not be described as new even in flattery, but gave off a feeling like an excellent restaurant backed by a long history and tradition. Nevertheless—

"Hey Haruaki, be honest here. What kind of restaurant does this look like to you?"

"...The entrance curtain clearly says 'Teishoku' which means set meals."

Haruaki looked out through the window of the stopping bus and answered honestly. Taizou apparently caught sight of the same building and started to grumble and mumble: "Are you kidding me? They're asking us to just buy a miso mackerel set meal each? That'll surely kill the mood completely—" But as soon as he spotted a shovel emerging from the seat in front, he immediately shut up.

Then according to Kaidou-sensei's explanations, although this restaurant was essentially a set meal eatery, it also accepted advance bookings for groups or banquets. Presumably, group customers must be a valuable source of business in a tourist area.

Everyone got off the bus and filed through the the door next to the main entrance, marked with "Group Customers Entrance," to reach the second floor. Led by the middle-aged lady and proprietress, they entered the room reserved exclusively for group customers. The space was large enough for an entire class to be seated without any crowding at all.

"Well then, please take your seats, students. Do not make too much noise. There should be normal customers on the first floor... Sorry, Sagisaki-sensei, but I shall rely on you to take over for I must go greet the proprietress."

"Y-Yes... Please count on me. I think I really want to fulfill my duties as a teacher... I guess... Umm, so everyone, it would be better to get seated starting from this side... I guess..."

The frail Sagisaki-sensei was still walking unsteadily. There was not a single cloud in the sky today as well. Perhaps due to people falling to heat stroke, ambulances could be seen rushing past them while they were traveling on the bus from the Temple of the Golden Pavilion to the next destination. Hence, as one might expect, Sagisaki-sensei was also suffering greatly again... Haruaki really hoped she could at least eat some lunch to recover her energy while hoping she would not force herself to eat till she ended up vomiting—Her face was so pale that the students worried about this.

Although seats were free for the choosing, Haruaki's group of boys still ended up sitting with Fear's group of girls. Haruaki discovered Fear was currently scowling and looking up at the ceiling.

"What's wrong, Fear? Did the scary eight-legged demon appear?"

"No... Stop saying such weird things, I'll curse you! I wasn't thinking in that direction, but now it's your fault that my imagination is running wild! Jeez... Uh—Let me reset my brain. Not here. Not here. That type of demon does not exist in this world. It does not spit out sticky threads and dangle down smugly. These are nothing more than urban legends. So it can't possibly appear here. Good, it's over!"

"That's quite a convenient brain you've got there..."

"Shut up, damn shameless brat, you shut up! I was just thinking... It's already the second day but nothing's changed. Because we visited three places in a row during the morning, I was hoping for something to happen. But what a disappointment."

"Oh... You're talking about that, right?"

Haruaki also lowered his voice. Indeed, even when today rolled around, they still had not received any information at all regarding the Indulgence Disks. And in fact, there was nothing to guarantee that they were going to get anything in the first place. They had simply interpreted the superintendent's words optimistically, thinking it was worth a shot.

Sitting opposite, Konoha and Kirika also leaned forward over the table and said quietly:

"Hmm—It does feel quite concerning..."

"Indeed. Although no matter what, since the superintendent went out of his way to say something meaningful, there should ultimately be something at least. Of course, this could very well be subjective speculation that's absolutely ridiculous."

"Umuu, it's almost time for some new leads, right? No matter how generous and forgiving I am, there are still limits. Why don't I simply call the superintendent right now and complain to him..."

Fear frowned, murmuring her grumbles. Even during an important event like the school excursion, she was still unable to forget the issue of the

Indulgence Disks. This desire was absolutely not going to disappear from her heart. She was going to keep desiring.

Fear was like that to begin with but Haruaki believed that she was currently expressing that desire more clearly and outwardly than before, presumably because she felt the necessity. The first reason that came to Haruaki's mind was Fear's discovery of a new and dangerous method of fighting. But apart from that, there were probably many other reasons. In a certain sense, this was also only natural.

As time went by, she was growing and developing gradually.

More and more like a human, growing accustomed to the human world, she was living and having contact with people.

Precisely because of that, it meant that she would gradually wish to distance herself from her curse. Hence, Haruaki felt that it was only natural that she would increasingly desire the Indulgence Disks.

Haruaki wished to realize her wish. He wished to assist Fear in reaching this goal that remained unchanged ever since she encountered him, that of wanting to become an ordinary human.

(Hold on, but if nothing actually happens next, it really might be best to call the superintendent and ask again...)

Just at this moment, the proprietress returned to the room and called out vigorously: "Sorry to keep everyone waiting—" She was also carrying many stacked trays of food. Then Kaidou-sensei, who had returned together with the proprietress, looked around and said:

"Do not just leave everything for others to do. Send out a few people to help carry the food back to share with your table."

On his table, Haruaki was sitting on the side closest to the edge of the room, so he got up and went with the other table representatives to the entrance area next to the room that seemed to be dirt-paved. The proprietress was not the only person carrying trays of food. Following behind her was another employee as well.

The employee seemed to be a girl. Like the proprietress, she was dressed in an apron with a white kerchief tied on her head. Due to the stacked layers of trays, her face could not be seen. At a glance, the girl seemed to

be loaded close to her limit already. Since a number of people had gathered before the proprietress as well, Haruaki said to the girl:

"Uh... I'll do the carrying, please hand them over to me."

"...Thanks."

In that instant, Haruaki suddenly felt a sense of dissonance. He kept feeling that the girl's slightly gruff and stiff voice sounded very familiar. Weird? While perplexed, Haruaki still carefully received the the stacked trays. Wow, it's heavier than expected. Hence he drew more strength from his back then proceeded to casually shift his gaze upwards. Upon seeing the server's face—

"...Huh?"

Then he exclaimed in surprise. It felt like his eyes were really going to pop out and fall off.

"What—!?"

The girl also backed away in shock. A familiar face, one that Haruaki never expected to see again. The face of a former enemy's.

The girl's back crashed into the wall. Hearing the sound, the proprietress looked back and issued orders: "Oh dear, Kuu-chan, what are you doing? There are more trays so hurry up and bring them!"

"...Kuu-chan?"

"S-Shut up! What the heck, why are you here...!?"

"Kuu-chan! How could you speak to a customer in that manner!? Oh, you know each other?"

Probably because she finally caught sight of the girl's face, Fear suddenly stood up with great alarm on her face, going "What—!?"

At this moment, from the passage connected to the end of the dirt floor entrance—probably leading to the second-floor kitchen—another employee emerged while carrying a tray, bowing her head as she passed beneath the curtains. Like the others, she was also dressed in an apron with a white kerchief on her head. However, she also had a rather striking characteristic.

She was not Japanese.

"Ara." She first looked at Fear then towards Haruaki before going—

"Welcome, everyone. Please relax and enjoy your meal."

Alice Bivorio Basskreigh was smiling like a tender mother while she spoke.



Chapter 2 - Significance of Returning Darkness / "the village where they perform"

Part 1

Bivorio. The former Matriarch of the «Bivorio Family» which was named after her—the insane organization that affirmed cursed tools, embracing them with love, accepting everything about them.

The former Matriarch.

The organization of the Family no longer existed.

"Sheesh... This is freaking incompetent..."

"Fufufu, I was quite taken by surprise too, because the original plan as agreed should have been later, meeting tomorrow or the day after that. An encounter here, is it purely coincidence? ...Or did your school's superintendent pull strings behind the scenes?"

After finishing lunch in a hurry, Haruaki's entourage gathered in the alley behind the restaurant. It was the quartet of Haruaki, Fear, Konoha and Kirika. When they were leaving the room, Shiraho and Un Izoey, who had seen Bivorio before, simply glanced at them without intentionally following along. On the other hand, it was also possible that Un Izoey was simply eavesdropping out of sight.

Meanwhile, apart from them, there were the former enemies—Alice Bivorio Basskreigh and Nikaidou Kururi. These two, like Haruaki's group, were seated on beer boxes in the alley. While Bivorio was smiling pleasantly, Kururi was pouting with displeasure.

The last time these two were seen was at the cultural festival—already half a year ago. As a result, their appearances were also slightly changed from before. Kururi's hairstyle and number of ornaments were both more toned down than before whereas Bivorio had simply shorn her head of super long hair, resulting in a housewife-like hairstyle. Furthermore, her monocle was now replaced by ordinary glasses. Presumably noticing Haruaki's gaze, she lifted her glasses lightly and said:

"Because in recent times, it's been difficult to buy monocles, especially in this country... So one side has a flat lens so that it's functionally the same.

Besides, it was something akin to a certain fashionable accessory to begin with."

"Cow Tits, are you really okay with this? Yet another meaning of your existence has disappeared."

"It's nothing more than an additional person wearing glasses, what are you talking about!?"

Konoha retorted sharply but instantly exhaled as though to regain her composure, then turned towards Bivorio and Kururi with a rather stiff expression. After all, a number of grudges existed between them, combined with recent, repeated instances of deception from the Knights' Dominion and the Draconians, it was only natural for Konoha to be highly wary.

"In any case, please start by telling us what you know. I have many questions for you."

"We will definitely give our full cooperation so long as the questions are within our ability to answer. Uh... Perhaps I have no right to say this, but all of you really have no need to be so wary... I have no idea whether you are willing to believe us, but we have lived our lives completely uninvolved with Wathes for a long time now. There is no reason for us to harm you."

"For the sake of believing you, that is why we must ask questions. So, first of all—"

About to start questioning, Konoha suddenly fell silent. What was the matter with her? Just as Haruaki felt baffled, the restaurant's back door suddenly opened and a young male employee in an apron poked his head out. He was a young man with an especially muscular build whose age looked like he had probably just graduated from high school.

Seeing him, Kururi clicked her tongue. Hearing that, the young man smiled like a mischievous child.

"Hey hey, Nikaidou, how could you click your tongue the moment you see someone—"

"...Shut your trap. Hey! Don't touch my head! Stop treating me like a child! So freaking incompetent!"

While the young man was stroking Kururi's kerchief with one hand, Kururi gruffly swatted his hand away. Although Kururi seemed to be frowning in

annoyance, in Haruaki's view, the scene seemed more like animals horsing around playfully with each other. Bivorio smiled while watching and said:

"Excuse me... Kouichirou-san, what's the matter? We have already obtained explicit permission from the proprietress to take a break. If the shop has gotten very busy again—"

"Oh—no no no, that's not it. It's just that I heard that Nikaidou had friends visiting and found it unbelievable that she could have friends here to see her—It's quite surprising. In that case, as her senior in the workplace, I must show her my generosity! This is a special treat for you guys, so don't tell your classmates!"

The young man shoved a plastic bag of canned drinks to Haruaki. Exactly four cans, no more, no less.

"Th-Thank you."

"Oh—I was wondering what kind of friends Nikaidou would have, but you turn out to be fairly ordinary... Not. Especially these girls here. Is the silver-haired foreigner related to Alice-san...?"

"Kouichirou, you're making a lot of noise! This is none of your business, so freaking incompetent! It's not your break time right now, so hurry and get back to work!"

"Ooh—Scary scary. All said and done, they must be friends from your old school, right? Thank you all for not forgetting this violent girl and even came to visit her. So I was thinking I should thank you on behalf of this girl who's so not honest with her feelings—"

"K-Kouichirou—!"

Kururi kicked the back door where Kouichirou's upper body was sticking out. Right before getting slammed by the door, the young man swiftly withdrew back into the shop. Before the door closed, he went "nuhahahaha! See ya!" The echoes of his hearty laughter instantly vanished and the alley returned to silence again.

Konoha exhaled deeply like a leaking ball. Haruaki could feel the nervous tension surrounding her dissipate slightly. The scene just now was exceedingly natural and ordinary. Precisely because of that, it served as an

authentic display of Bivorio and Kururi's current lives without a shred of pretense.

Rather than through words, it could be felt from the atmosphere. No longer shrouded in nights painted with bloodshed and curses, they were living this type of exceedingly ordinary and matter-of-fact daily life, as displayed just now, with occasional teasing or squabbling with coworkers.

Distributing the received drinks, Haruaki said:

"Uh... You two... seem to be... living well. That guy just now looks very friendly. Can I trouble you to thank him for us later?"

"Fool, there's no such need. That guy's just an idiot, pure and simple. He's just curious and wanted to see what the people I know look like."

"After that time at the cultural festival, you've been working here?"

The last time they saw Bivorio and Kururi was when they had lost the fake god that served as the Family's center, having lost the dogma known as love; however, surviving family members were still family, hence they had departed together, side by side. Thereafter, no further news about them was heard.

Bivorio answered Haruaki's question:

"We spent roughly a month wandering all over the place, looking for a place to settle down. However, yes... After that time, this is the first place where we truly settled down to begin a new life. I cannot thank the proprietress enough for being willing to take us in."

"Speaking of which, why did you choose Kyoto?"

Konoha's question caused Bivorio to smile demurely:

"It happened naturally. Because I was thinking there should be job opportunities in a tourist area and also because it won't be strange even if foreigners appeared here. Personally, I am also quite interested in this country's traditional culture... I suppose you could say that I came for a look while sightseeing at the same time."

"That's unexpectedly fitting. By the way, speaking of foreigners, there should be one more, right?"

"Yes. Where is Oratorie Rabdulmunagh? I think you took her with you."

Hearing Fear and Kirika's questioning, Bivorio frowned in a slightly troubled manner. Kururi scowled and pouted on the other hand.

"...She's been cooped up at home all this time. A shut-in, so to speak. Freaking incompetent."

"I believe that she does understand concretely that everything is over—But the trauma in her heart has not healed entirely. Much time would probably be needed before she pulls herself together again."

"Hmm... So basically, the three of you are living here currently and working at this place at the same time as well."

"Indeed."

Their current situation was understood, more or less. However, this did not mean the matter was hereby concluded. Visiting this place by chance during Haruaki's year group's school excursion, meeting the former members of the Bivorio Family by chance—The current situation could not possibly be summed in such simple words.

"You just mentioned something about the original plan being a meeting with us tomorrow or the day after that, didn't you? In other words, you intended to contact us in the first place."

"Yes. Encountering you here was completely beyond my expectation."

"If I ask you 'what's going on here?' again that'd be too much beating around the bush. So I'm gonna ask this now."

Fear narrowed her eyes and glared sharply, then said curtly:

"—Hand it over."

Bivorio smiled while answering.

"Impossible at the moment."

Fear's gaze turned even sharper. Naturally, Haruaki understood what they were talking about.

School excursion. Encountering Bivorio's group there. It would be utterly dimwitted if one still thought they were unrelated. In other words—

"The superintendent said that we'll be able to obtain an Indulgence Disk as long as we go west—In other words, you have an Indulgence Disk in your possession, right?"

"Only half right. Hence, that is why I can only answer you... Impossible at the moment."

"What do you mean by half right?"

Bivorio gently exchanged gazes with Kururi.

"No need to keep things secret, right? I think we can reveal all of it."

"Indeed. Then I shall explain to you all. Although we have currently mended our ways and live in seclusion away from the world of Wathes, there is a certain person who has taken care of us since a while ago and stays in touch. That person is both an information broker and a supplier."

"What's a supplier?"

Fear cocked her head and asked.

"Exactly what the word means. A merchant who provides all sorts of supplies to others. Not only food or other logistical supplies but also anything and everything you could need. Provided you can pay, even Wathes can be provided sometimes. But this time, things started not because he gave us something as a supplier but because he provided certain information as an information broker."

"That information is...?"

Bivorio swept her gaze lightly across Haruaki's group before saying:

"Information regarding Hinai Elsie falling into the hands of the Lab Chief's Nation. To begin with, another reason I kept in contact with him was in order to continue gathering information about scattered members of the disbanded Family."

"! ...That girl? Speaking of which, she really did mention that she used to be a member of the Family..."

As for the source of this information, it was Himura Sunao who had not reappeared since last time. Probably frowning due to recalling him, Kirika asked quietly:

"Have you heard the whole story? Do you also know why she is under the custody of the Lab Chief's Nation... and why she bit her tongue to commit suicide and nearly died?"

"Yes, I have basically heard already."

"Although she was being controlled, we can't claim to be completely free of blame, so what's your opinion on this? Furthermore, we also destroyed that cursed pocket watch."

Konoha spoke with a bit of tense caution, but Bivorio simply shook her head lightly:

"I bear you no resentment. Also, I have no wish for Elsie to serve as combat potential so I don't care about «Clockwork Life» either. It's just that—regarding Elsie who had survived despite taken orders from me who has committed great wrongs—I wish to accept her once again properly. Just like with Oratorie. It is my duty."

"Hmph. Who knows, that girl might have trouble accepting reality as well and end up as a shut in."

"Yes... But because Elsie and Oratorie used to be very close, I am thinking, very optimistically, if they could be allowed to meet again and support each other, this might serve as the chance for them to pull themselves together again."

Even after hearing Fear's slightly malicious taunting, Bivorio answered with a steady smile. But steady was not its only quality. From her expression, Haruaki could feel her firm resolve and the tenacity in the depths of her heart. Existing in her heart was the noble-minded determination to face and accept her past mistakes without faltering at all.

"Consequently, having known of Elsie's whereabouts, I decided she must be brought back. But we have offended the Lab Chief's Nation in the past. Even if we requested the release of Elsie, they probably would not agree generously."

"After all, you even went as far as to use suicide bombings. This is hardly surprising—No, I simply think so as someone completely unrelated to the Lab Chief's Nation."

In her response, Kirika once again asserted the fact that she had already quit the organization. Then Kururi spoke:

"Even if we demanded directly, they probably won't return her... Since that's the case, we can only consider other indirect means. In other words, asking someone else to act as a go-between."

"With connections to both the Lab Chief's Nation and us, yet low in danger, in other words—"

"Us, right...?"

"Indeed. Including the Yachi family, Fear-in-Cube, Muramasa, Yamimagari Pakuaki's sister, the superintendent and former Draconian, as well as various people gathered due to all sorts of reasons, it would not be an exaggeration to call your community a faction—naming it the 'Yachi Family' or 'Taishyuu High'."

That's too exaggerated—Haruaki thought. But at the same time, he did understand how others would see them as such, given how special these people around him were.

"Muu. 'Fear and Her Happy Servants' would be a better name."

"I'm so surprised I can't even find a good reason. Speaking of which, we don't even count as friends?"

"Fine, then name it 'Fear and Her Happy Friends and Others'... Anyway! You want us to act as a go-between, then what?"

"Of course, I have also prepared compensation accordingly. I know of only one thing that can serve as compensation, something that you desire greatly. Hence, I asked the aforementioned information broker—but acting as a supplier this time—He recently contacted me, saying he had finally found connections to obtain one."

"In other words, an Indulgence Disk, right?"

"Yes. So that was when I contacted your school's superintendent, because I was thinking that many preparations would be necessary beforehand... Although for some unknown reason, he agreed immediately as soon as I mentioned the Indulgence Disk."

This probably happened after Fear had asked the superintendent to "help gather information about the Indulgence Disks," which was why he agreed to Bivorio's request. Furthermore, this must have taken place shortly before the school excursion, which was why the superintendent suddenly

thought of a prank and asked Haruaki's group to undertake the transaction locally—

"Good grief... So it turns out that the superintendent decided to say nothing just because he wanted us to be in for a surprise? How absolutely ridiculous. However, this is indeed something worth considering. What should we do?"

"Anyway, let's verify it first. Furthermore, I wish to complain to him a bit."

Next, Konoha used her cellphone to call the superintendent, her eyebrows moving as she spoke: "Yes... It is true as one would expect... Very well, I understand. Also, please allow me to say a few additional words. Basically, please show some restraint and don't ever toy with us again using such an unnecessary prank..." It looked like it would be best to leave Konoha for now to scold the superintendent for being deliberately vague in an attempt to startle them.

"So... What do you think, Fear?"

"You mean whether to accept their request or not? Of course, I really want to accept. As for the reasons... Well, first of all, we are definitely responsible for that Hinai Elsie girl being at the Lab Chief's Nation right now. Secondly, the reward of an Indulgence Disk is very attractive."

Fear nodded vigorously as though agreeing with herself and continued:

"That's right, my primary goal right now is to obtain Indulgence Disks. I've already decided to gather as many Indulgence Disks as possible, no matter how much hardship or suffering I must endure. Given this rare possibility of getting one, I absolutely won't let this chance go to waste!"

Since Fear's resolve was this firm, Haruaki decided not to say anything more. All he needed to do next was support her as usual, dedicating everything he could.

At this moment, Konoha also closed her cellphone to join the conversation, having finished complaining to the superintendent. While talking on the phone, she had apparently paid attention to the progress of the conversation, hence she sighed and said:

"It really can't be helped... In the end, the conclusion is to accept the facilitating role of a go-between."

"Umuu, after all, they've become no different from ordinary people now. In that sense, this also counts as doing a good deed and helping others, so assisting them is not a bad thing."

"Yes yes, I understand. As one would expect, the superintendent is handling everything from the start, being the skilled negotiator that he is. I really wish he'll have this matter dealt with, never to have us involved in this again."

Konoha shrugged and said, then looked towards Kururi and Bivorio as though she suddenly remembered something:

"Speaking of which, I would like to confirm something with you. Considering what you said just now about it being 'impossible at the moment'... This means that you currently have yet to obtain the Indulgence Disk, is that correct?"

"Our appointment with the supplier is tonight. Then after receiving it, the plan is to find a suitable time to hand it to you another day... Arghhh, so freaking incompetent. By the way, I never intended to show up at all from the start. Why did you guys have to come running over while I'm dressed like this?"

Kururi started grumbling again. I never expected the apron look to suit you so well—Haruaki thought, but kept silent because he knew he would surely be punched if he said it out loud honestly.

"Hmm, in other words, we have to wait until tonight to get it?"

"Indeed."

"But I really want to get it right away. When is your appointment? If possible, I want you to hand it to me directly."

"Yes... Handing it over to you as soon as possible also means that we can urge the superintendent to hurry and start taking action. I will tell you."

Hence, Bivorio told them the appointed time and location of the meeting with the supplier. After recording the information in their cellphones, they took the opportunity to exchange phone numbers with Bivorio and Kururi to facilitate further communications.

"This feels really weird."

"Shut up, you incompetent bastard! I'm gonna slaughter you. Once this is over, you must erase it!"

"Take this! The number transmitting beam!"

"Ara ara, ufufu. Thank you very much."

"You two have changed your attitudes with unexpected speed... Sigh."

"...This sort of thing would be totally impossible if Konoha-kun and I were the only ones present. I can't believe you're exchanging cellphone numbers casually with former enemies... Although it's not a bad thing, it's still absolutely ridiculous... Maybe? I don't really understand."

Despite some uneasiness, Konoha and Kirika still exchanged numbers with Bivorio and Kururi.

Just at this time, Konoha looked up at the back door again, apparently sensing someone's presence.

The handle rattled and turned. Then the person emerged—Not Kouichirou from just now but the timid and bespectacled Sagisaki-sensei.

"Uh... I am calling you like a teacher, or at least I believe so! Since we seem to be setting off soon, if possible, please conclude your reunion with old friends for now..."

"Oh really? Got it."

The time for this meeting was obtained by finishing lunch rapidly then asking the teachers "Can we have a reunion with friends before we set off?" in a semi-forceful manner to refuse dissent. Hence, they had no choice but to return as soon as they were called.

"I am truly sorry for taking up so much of your students' time. Since we have not met for such a long time, it accidentally dragged on... Disrupting the group's movements would be terrible, so let us conclude our meeting right now."

"Y-You are too polite... You're even more like a teacher than me, it makes me feel very shocked!"

Bivorio and Sagisaki-sensei kept nodding frequently to acknowledge each other, truly an extremely bizarre sight. Kururi went "hmp" while standing up from a beer box. Then entering the back door, she said:

"Since the carefree students have finished eating, it means our break time is over. Hurry and start clearing up before that idiot Kouichirou comes over to nag us as though he's got dirt on us, mom—"

Kururi suddenly stopped talking as though trying to swallow the atmosphere in one gulp. Immediately, she glared with both eyes as she looked back, apparently breaking out in cold sweat—

She noticed Haruaki's group watching her intently.

"Ooh... Ah..."

Her face turned increasingly red within the blink of an eye.

Her mouth kept opening and closing, even without expelling any air.

Finally—

"F-Freaking incompetent—!"

Simply relying on the vigor of this incomprehensible catchphrase, she overturned the mood at hand, then rushed swiftly into the shop as though insisting that she knew nothing and nothing concerned at all.

"?" Only Sagisaki-sensei remained puzzled, but Haruaki's group secretly looked at Bivorio. She was simply smiling as though saying "ara ara."

"...She's always like this?"

"Always, ever since settling down here. It makes me so glad."

Haruaki confirmed just in case, then listened to Bivorio's answer. About the slip of the tongue that Kururi had just tried to pretend she never said. The simple term of address, extremely ordinary and perfectly commonplace.

Nevertheless, it exhibited a very important truth. Far clearer than all other evidence, it explained their current situation. Hence, Haruaki remarked with a gentle expression:

"Whether you or her, things are going well for you both."

"Yes, I am proud of her as part of my family."

Bivorio also answered with a very blissful smile.

That night, they were going to meet up with Bivorio. At the appointed time, Bivorio was to receive the Indulgence Disk from the supplier then hand it directly over to Fear's group. That was essentially the planned rundown.

"There's finally a clue to what was bothering me! Now at last, I can enjoy the school excursion to the max...!"

Fear resumed the afternoon's schedule with utmost vigor. Having arrived in the northwest region in the morning, everyone now took a bus to head south. First they visited the Buddha statues at Kouryuu-ji but that was just a prelude. The main tourist attraction for the afternoon was a place nearby, the first site on this excursion that was neither a shrine nor a Buddhist temple—

Toei Kyoto Studio Park.

Sitting in the bus on their way to the next destination after Kouryuu-ji, Fear looked at the booklet and moaned:

"Hey hey, will there really be those ancient streets they show on television from time to time? In other words, there are imitations of the real thing, or rather, authentic fakes?"

"Although I don't really get what you're talking about, Fear-kun... They should be identical to what you saw on television. We might even get to see sets that happen to be used for shooting period dramas right now."

"Speaking of which, Konoha often watches period dramas and seems to know a lot about the subject. She looks like she's looking forward the most to visit this place."

"Oh dear... Who knows, fufu. But it's indeed quite true that I might very well become a little excited after seeing things for real. Like pointing out 'Ah! So this is the castle moat where drowned corpses often float up!'"

High school girls getting excited about discovering that kind of place would be a little unusual—Although this thought occurred to Haruaki, he decided not to say anything to dampen her enthusiasm.

They arrived shortly because Kouryuu-ji and the Studio Park were quite near. Despite being a renowned tourist destination, the road was a bit narrow. While the bus was moving along the road, buildings came into view outside the windows, bearing an atmosphere completely different

from that of the surrounding scenery. A trapezoidal foundation, stable and solid, along with a structure covered by gray bricks...

"I-It's a castle! No, or is it just the main gate? Anyway, it feels like a rocket could be shot out from that gap any moment now!"

"What kind of comment is that?"

The students chatted noisily while getting off the bus in the parking lot. Once the teachers had finished confirming the student numbers, Haruaki's class went to the group entrance—or rather, they entered the Studio Park through the group entrance and lined up in front of a water fountain.

"You have two hours of free time starting now. Please stay in your groups as much as possible when moving about, so that channels of communication remain clear if anything happened. Phone me or Sagisaki-sensei if there are any problems. That is all."

Kaidou-sensei quickly finished speaking in a slightly restless manner, thus concluding the announcements. Immediately before anyone else, she proceeded to walk rapidly towards the period drama streets—carrying her shovel like a warrior's sword. Speaking of which, she had told Haruaki before that she frequently watched period dramas. Looks like she's also looking forward to having fun here, oh well, teachers are people too, after all.

"Hmm, even at a casual glance, this really feels like I'm in a period drama! Where should I start? Looks like there's so much to check out!"

"In any case, I would like to have a look at the outdoor film sets first. Haruaki-kun, is that okay?"

"Oh sure, it's totally fine with me. Feel free to lead. On the other hand, Taizou, are you guys fine with this? Although we're staying together with Fear's group again as usual, you do know that we're in a separate group after all, so we're allowed to move about on our own—"

"Haruaki! You want-wit of a fool!"

For some reason, Taizou was angrily reprimanding Haruaki using dialogue that belonged very much to a period drama. Animori also shouted:

"We are joined by one soul, right? Miyama! The one who has nothing to do with meal coupons, Miyama, right!?"

"Of course! I wish for a couple more side dish coupons! Anyway, our two groups will move together. It's not like we lose anything by doing that."

"I feel like there's some incomprehensible dialogue mixed in here, but personally, it takes a load off my mind if I can keep an eye on Fear to prevent her from doing anything weird... So I'm fine with it if no one has any objections."

"Excellent." The boys nodded repeatedly. As a result, Haruaki's and Fear's groups toured this site together again. Haruaki could not help but think to himself: myself aside, don't you guys have anything resembling self-determination?

Then while everyone was looking at the guide booklet and was about to start walking—

"Kyah—" A girl's scream could be heard from ahead. However, it was not a scream of tragedy.

It was purely a scream of excitement.

"Look at that guy, he's so cool—!"

"He's utterly handsome!"

Drawn by the girls' voices, Haruaki looked up and was rendered speechless.

They had just encountered Bivorio and Kururi.

Now, in addition, for some reason, in this Studio Park...

They met this person—!

At this moment, a certain person suddenly halted next to Haruaki. After witnessing the same image as Haruaki's group, she blinked repeatedly in disbelief.

"Lab Chief...? Why are you here? I question with this kind of question."

"Hahaha! Allow me to answer your unknown—You forgot to pack something, right? I happened to pay Shinohogi a visit, so after being informed of that, I decided to be a busybody and helped deliver this to you."

Kirika clenched her fists tightly and glared murderously as usual at the man in the black lab coat.

"Kirika, don't stare at me so viciously. It truly breaks my heart to see my precious little sister glaring at me like this... By the way, let me explain, I simply came to deliver something she had forgotten, so I'm not here to cause anyone trouble. I won't go back on my promise."

Some other students, unaware of the hidden circumstances, were clamoring in a carefree manner: "Eh~! It's Class Rep's older brother!?" "You really should introduce him to us~!" These voices sounded as though they were coming from another world, seeming extremely distant and unreal.

In any case, Haruaki's group first moved over to an inconspicuous corner within the grounds. Although Haruaki felt apologetic to Kana, Taizou and the rest, but they had no choice but to forcefully cover things up by saying "We're going to discuss some family business" and asking the uninvolved members of the group to wait slightly further away. Naturally, Un Izoey came along as well. She was supposed to be in Shiraho's group, but they were nowhere in sight.

After forcing Pakuaki into a corner with no escape, the group stared intently at him without lowering their guard. The only exception was Un Izoey whose gaze wandered casually while she cocked her head.

"So, Lab Chief—My question: I'd like to confirm if what you said just now is true?"

"I can assert with absolute certainty, of course it is. Let me hand it over to you first. Let's see, where did I put it?"

Pakuaki reached into a pocket in his black lab coat and began to rummage. "How odd..." He tilted his head, bent forward and reached further into the depths—This was truly very strange. Despite having Pakuaki's arm clearly stuffed into his pocket up to his elbow, his black lab coat did not bulge at all. In contrast to Fear and the rest who were narrowing their eyes warily, Pakuaki said nonchalantly:

"Oh, this thing? Simply stated—hoho, this is what's known as a 'fourth dimensional pocket.' Although the usable space can be described as fourth dimensional, it's actually not very big. Probably two or three cardboard boxes' worth at most—Similar to the mobile laboratory «The World Seen

by Alicia Pitrelli» that you people destroyed last time. It's achieved by transplanting a cursed pocket onto this lab coat here... Oh, is this it?"

Pakuaki suddenly fished out a paper bag from his pocket. Naturally, the paper bag's size could not possibly fit into a conventional pocket, hence the scene was highly bizarre to behold.

"Shinohogi refused to tell me any details regarding the contents, but I still need to make a confirmation first. Un Izoey, this is what you forgot to bring, correct?"

Pakuaki swiftly opened the paper bag and picked up something inside to present before Un Izoey's eyes. A piece of fabric. Haruaki remembered. During his trip to the bathroom on the bullet train, Un Izoey had spread out fabric while talking on the cellphone in the train passageway. It looked like the same type of fabric.

"M-My answer... Yes. However..."

Speaking of which, the phone call back then was indeed to inform Un Izoey that she had forgotten to pack something. Now it turned out that Pakuaki had brought what she had missed. Indeed, Haruaki also remembered Un Izoey mentioning on the phone their upcoming itinerary... This could more or less explain the series of developments. However, there was one thing that Haruaki still did not understand, a very simple question. What exactly was that piece of fabric which she had forgotten to bring?

Pakuaki seemed to be harboring the same question as Haruaki, asking with inexplicable excitement:

"Very well. So, what exactly is this piece of fabric? Regarding this unknown, Shinohogi told me to ask you directly, so I'm really looking forward to the answer—"

"A change of underwear."

"...The price for turning the unknown into the known... Am I overthinking things? Somehow, I get the feeling that the gazes of my sister and those girls are undergoing a certain change. Even to the point of slight derision."

It's been like that from the start—Surely everyone must be whispering the same thing in their heart. In any case, Pakuaki shrugged and put down the

piece of fabric, handing it along with the paper bag over to Un Izoey, who received it with slight embarrassment.

Then again, since it's just underwear, can't you just buy another set?—This thought occurred to Haruaki more or less, but then he recalled that either Kuroe or someone else had mentioned it before. Un Izoey's underwear, how should it be described? It greatly resembled a fundoshi loincloth. The fact that it looked like nothing more than a long strip of cloth now verified that piece of news. Considering how unconventional her underwear was, it most likely involved various reasons such as tribal traditions or honor.

At this moment, Fear took a great step forward.

"Are you done now? Then hurry and leave!"

"Hmm—How cold. It's been so long already, a bit of casual chatting wouldn't hurt, right...? Come on, people, considering the significance of a long-awaited family reunion—"

"None. Leave now. Absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika answered without any hesitation at all. Pakuaki shrugged again.

"How lonely it feels... However, I might end up suffering a direct attack if I dally here any longer, so I guess it's time to retreat."

Pakuaki walked away decisively. Un Izoey directed her words towards him as he left:

"Lab Chief, I express my thanks for your efforts in making this trip."

"Not at all, don't worry about it. I never expected I would be so free. But then I would never do this unless I were very free."

Pakuaki looked back with a smile then departed with a light wave of his hand. Konoha stared warily at him receding in the distance while frowning with a whisper:

"No matter how free... He is the leader of an organization after all. Would he really go out of his way to make a trip just to deliver underwear?"

"My answer: I give the explanation that the Lab Chief's reason of movement is currently unclear. It is an unknown."

Although it still felt rather concerning, no actual harm had been done so far. All that happened was purely Un Izoey obtaining a change of underwear she could start using the next day. Dangerously, Un Izoey was muttering: "Thank goodness. I was just thinking, rather than buy unfamiliar underwear, I might as well go without any starting tomorrow" while nodding frequently.

Next, Un Izoey immediately phoned Shiraho's group to meet up with them, then walked away. Haruaki's group also went over to where Kana and the others were waiting. In any case, they simply counted their blessings that Pakuaki had not sought trouble with anyone, then they resumed their tour of the Studio Park.

"You're back—Oh, Kirika-chan, what's wrong? You're making a scary expression."

"Hmm? Really? I see... How absolutely ridiculous, it's not my intention."

Kana asked with her head tilted, prompting Kirika to rub her own cheeks with one hand. Presumably, the nervous tension from facing off against Pakuaki still had not dissipated completely. But as soon as she noticed Haruaki's gaze, Kirika blushed in surprise and turned her face away.

"Oh, you've recovered. It's the adorable Kirika-chan as usual!"

"Absolutely ridiculous! A-Adorable? What nonsense!"

"No no no, Kirika-chan, you were also very adorable just now when you were a little red like an octopus—"

"K-Kana!"

Meanwhile, the group was finally starting their tour of the Studio Park. As discussed earlier, their first destination was an outdoor film set used for period dramas.

"By the way, that guy just now, was he really Kirika-chan's older brother?"

"Because there are many things that are difficult to bring up... I'd really appreciate it if you don't ask..."

Haruaki felt very bad for Kirika, seeing that she had no choice but to stutter and answer Kana vaguely. But even if he tried to intervene, it would only make things more difficult.

Hence, he really felt relieved when they reached the outdoor film set, a neighborhood of streets. Haruaki was prepared to devote all his efforts towards changing the subject. Presumably thinking the same thing, Fear and the other girls also chimed in:

"Oh Kana, we're there! So amazing, the whole place really is like being in a period drama!"

"Yes, look at that! There are even samurai warriors walking around nonchalantly with their hair in topknots!"

"Wow... This sure brings back many memories. This atmosphere is so nostalgic... Ah, uh... I mean from television, yes! Indeed, of course I find it nostalgic only because I've seen it on television before, of course!"

"Come take a photo! Photo! Fear, it's a rare chance, go grab that samurai over there!"

"Leave it to me! ...I've caught him!"

With a topknot-wearing samurai actor (or perhaps a tourist simply experiencing what it was like to be a samurai) in the center, the group forcibly took a commemorative photo before continuing their exploration of Edo period streets. Low-rise tenement houses were lined in a row along the street, making one feel as though they had entered an alternate world. Small private schools, lookout towers for guarding against fires, guardhouses, tradesmen's houses, tenement houses... Konoha kept sighing in nostalgia while smiling throughout.

Simply walking among these sights was happy enough already, but there were performances as well, of course. Seeing a crowd gathered up ahead, Haruaki craned his neck to look and found two samurai warriors wielding their swords in a duel. Rather than a brawl, this was a martial arts performance show. After the roughly five-minute performance, the actors swept their eyes across the audience and invited volunteers in a tone of voice like it was some sort of act: "I shall proceed to teach how a staged sword fight is performed! Is there anyone present who believes they deserve the chance more than anyone else!?" "Ooh... A martial arts scene..." Seeing Konoha showing apparent interest, Haruaki said:

"Just go ahead if you feel like participating. It'll make for a good memory."

"Eh? Ehehe, you're right... Although it feels a little embarrassing, I shall participate!"

"I don't actually get it, but it looks really fun! I wanna join in too!"

Haruaki frantically grabbed Fear's collar as she was about to rush forward.

"Hold on, hold on, there are too many people volunteering so they've already stopped inviting people. You should give up... Rather, if you were to join in, all I can imagine is seeing you and Konoha locked in a serious fight with each other."

"Muu—"

Although there were a few other participants, Konoha was the first to receive the actor's instruction. Naturally, both of them were wielding bamboo swords. Touching the tips of their bamboo swords together lightly, the actor began to explain—

"You get it? First, the sword tip has to be like this—"

"Take this!"

However, Konoha instantly swung her bamboo sword towards the samurai before her with lightning speed. Faced with this sudden attack, the actor played along and pretended to stumble backwards, swaying painfully from side to side.

"Huff...! W-Why!? Miss, it's too soon!"

Konoha replied as though suddenly regaining her senses:

"M-My deep apologies, I didn't expect the bamboo sword to feel so real in my hands and couldn't help but get excited!"

"...C-Cough. Th-The injury isn't serious so don't worry. So, let's get back to the sparring instructions. Listen carefully, after I swing like this, you should swing back like this."

"Eh? But if I swing it like this then parry like that, it'll be easier for the returning blade to slash the enemy's throat, isn't that right? Have a look, just like this."

Whoosh whoosh whoosh! Konoha swung the bamboo sword so rapidly that one could almost see afterimages. By the time the actor noticed, he had already lost balance and the sword tip was already pressed tightly against his throat. A droplet of cold sweat slid down the actor's forehead. Haruaki could successfully garner all sorts of messages coming from the

actor's expression. For example: What should I do? Should I scream again and pretend to be defeated by her? Or is it time for me to remind her seriously? What's with this girl?

"Wow—Konoha-chan really is an obsessive fan of staged sword fighting! Even an expert admits defeat against the swings of her sword!" While Kana and others were misunderstanding in a positive direction, Fear narrowed her eyes and whispered while watching the scene:

"Even if I didn't take part, she's still violent as ever."

"...I'll have to withhold my comment since I'm the one who recommended her to participate without much forethought. Anyway, I'm really glad that it's just a bamboo sword."



After the martial arts instruction that could be considered Konoha's personal performance, Haruaki's group began to tour around again.

"Yoshiwara Street... What is this place? There are so many identical shops all in a row."

"Fear-chan, about that, basically... Whisper whisper..."

"What!? Th-That's too shameless—Damn you, shameless brat!"

"Ah, ouch! Why are you hitting me? Totally nonsensical!"

"I can't believe you can touch each other for no particular reason... Damn you, Haruaki, the probability of a perfect crime happening has now reached 90%...!"

Advancing through the eras, they were now walking along streets in the Meiji period and could see various antique buildings. Kana pointed to a displayed item in front of a shop and giggled with an evil grin while saying:

"Eh, Kirika-chan, I really want to take a photo with everyone sitting on top of that. Right, what is this thing called again? I suddenly forgot, can you tell me?"

"Oh, that's... it's... the Chin... Train, I guess."

Kirika awkwardly turned her gaze away in embarrassment. For some reason, Kana was repeatedly snapping photos of Kirika like mad. Then she sought her next prey.

"I didn't hear you. Oh right, let's have Konoha-chan tell me instead, ufufu."

"Eh? Th-That's... Haha, what is it...?"

For some reason, Kana kept snapping photos of the embarrassed Konoha. At this moment, Fear spoke up:

"You can find out just by reading the guide booklet—Allow me to inform you, it's the Chin-Chin Train!"^[6]

"Have you no sense of delicacy!? Also, Miyama-san, please stop playing these childish games like a grade schooler! I am beginning to suspect you of being possessed by the spirit of that self-employed hairstylist from our home!"

In addition, there were many other attractions that they watched with great interest and excitement. They expressed their admiration for the glamorous decorations at the theater, watched Konoha show off her throwing skills at the shuriken training hall, and were awed by the monsters emerging from the castle moat.

"Hmm, I was thinking that everything here would be very historical like in period drams, but even monsters appeared... I really can't underestimate this place. It's too chaotic."

Hearing Fear's impressed remarks, Haruaki could not help but smile wryly. At the same time, he suddenly noticed something in the corner of his eye. Beside the moat, in front of a structure resembling the main gate, someone familiar was standing there.

(Oh, it's the girl who was riding a deer yesterday...?)

Wa Lolita attire, hair styled into curls, a pretty face with cute and dainty features, she was the girl Haruaki had met at Nara Park previously. Since she was quite far away, she did not look like she had noticed him. The girl had her eyes narrowed and seemed to be looking at the flag that was bearing the word "Integrity" and hanging high above the gate. This was apparently the Shinsengumi garrison simulation zone.^[7]

"..."

The girl seemed to nod lightly. Perhaps it was Haruaki's imagination, but she seemed quite satisfied. Next, the girl walked somewhere else without noticing Haruaki.

To think I'd encounter her twice in different locations—Haruaki thought to himself. But then again, seeing as both sites were famous tourist attractions, this was actually quite likely. All Haruaki could conclude was that strings of fate were at work here at most.

Feeling a little hungry around this time, they decided to take a break.

"What a great idea. After all, lunch was so early. This time, I really must gorge myself with tasty food. So, I must insist strongly that there must be a tea house somewhere here! It's very possible that it might even feature legendary rice crackers whose recipe was passed down since the Edo period!"

Rice crackers aside, there was definitely no particular reason to oppose Fear's idea. Hence, the group looked at the map in their guide booklet and walked over to a tea house where snacks should be available. Finally, they reached a tea house that was like the ones seen on television, with seats covered with red cloth and arranged outside the shop. The banner and the sign were also quite historical in appearance.

Nevertheless, they did not want to enter the tea house at all. This was due to the problem they discovered they had to resolve first before entering.

"Eh—I see now. I can't believe you're working in a research lab, that's so amazing~!"

"Ueno-san is very smart too, I guess it runs in the family... I'm so jealous."

"Hahaha, she is my prided little sister. I hope everyone can get along well with her."

"So—that's the place where Un Izoey-san works?"

"My reply: yes. I give the explanation that our relationship is like boss and employee."

Kirika stumbled on the spot, pressing her palm against her forehead. Her anger and astonishment had apparently reached dizzying levels. At the same time, Pakuaki also seemed to have noticed their arrival. Surrounded by roughly two groups of girls, Pakuaki poked his head forward.

"Hi, what a coincidence."

"What are you talking about? Didn't you say you were leaving?"

Due to being surrounded by uninvolved people, Fear could not release her ill will without restraint, hence she simply scowled as she spoke. As a result, Pakuaki smiled leisurely and said:

"I said I was going to retreat, but never said anything about leaving. Also, I did mention that I am very free, right? Since I haven't been to this kind of place for a long time, this is merely personal sightseeing... Yes, who could have thought that this tea goes so well with CalorieMate. Truly a new discovery."

Despite sitting in the tea house, Pakuaki was eating his favorite CalorieMate as though taunting the establishment. But at least the cup of tea seemed to be a drink sold by the tea house. On the other hand—

"I supplement: giving the explanation that I am taking care of my boss based on personal relationship."

Un Izoey was also sitting next to Pakuaki, chewing and taking large bites of round dumplings. No matter what, Pakuaki was indeed the most important person to her. Although it was unclear whether she was doing this on her own volition or following orders, in any case, she was serving as Pakuaki's bodyguard at least for now.

Seated at another spot outside the tea house were two others who were in the same group as Un Izoey—Shiraho and Hinata. Hinata was simply drinking tea with contentment written all over her face while Shiraho was resting her face against her crossed legs, eyes narrowed with displeasure. As a start, Haruaki's group hoped to get some information from her.

"Uh... What's the situation?"

"Ever since that man arrived, we have totally become his accessories. This is because the dark-skinned girl follows him closely wherever the man goes, leaving us no choice but to follow along reluctantly. Furthermore, that man seems to decide each subsequent destination arbitrarily by listening to the suggestions of those girls surrounding him. Isn't this tantamount to me getting dragged all over the place by that big group of sycophantic followers? I don't have particular preference for the sights but going about things this way is giving me a lot of stress. In other words, can you go and die, human?"

"Uh, even if you deliver the conclusion in such a matter-of-fact manner..."

Shiraho proceeded to lower her voice slightly and continued:

"Also—I should ask this first. Is that man someone respectable?"

"Not at all. You probably didn't see him directly, but he's the mastermind behind the cultural festival commotion that time... But we currently have something like a ceasefire agreement. If you're asking that, did he do something to you?"

"I simply gathered this impression from the dark-skinned girl's attitude—Also just now, she even kicked a pebble by her foot and struck down a ninja who was about to pass overhead on a wire."

"R-Really..."

It looked like Un Izoey really was serving dutifully as a bodyguard as expected.

While they were whispering discreetly, the others such as Taizou and Kana had already walked into the shop. "Anyway, let's order first and everyone take a break!" Left without a choice, Haruaki's faction was compelled to follow. Just like during lunch, they ate without tasting their food due to their concerned attention being drawn to Pakuaki outside the window, surrounded by girls and making them scream time after time. Presumably, things were even worse for Kirika who was more than simply concerned.

In this manner, the unsettling break concluded and Haruaki's group left the tea house. At this moment—

"So, let's tour around a bit more... Are you willing to continue serving as my guides?"

"Gladly of course—" The girls in the other groups all answered together at once. Un Izoey proceeded to get up matter-of-factly, forcing Shiraho and Hinata to follow with helpless expressions on their faces. The members of Haruaki's group exchanged looks.

"What should we do...?"

"Given so many people, I don't think he'll do anything weird, but still—"

"Leaving him alone is too worrying. Ueno-san, what should we do?"

"P-Personally... 'Follow them' is the only conclusion I can reach...! Even though it's truly and absolutely ridiculous!"

Vicious as a wild beast, Kirika threw a glance towards Pakuaki's back and continued:

"As hard as it is to bear the sight of him wandering before my eyes, if I don't chase after him, I won't be able to stop myself from imagining what things he might do to that group of girls... So at the very least, it'll be better than this kind of self-abusive mental state."

"I can understand clearly how you feel. Then let's follow them."

"Sorry." Kirika started walking after a brief answer. Haruaki glanced at the side of her face and asked:

"C-Class Rep, are you okay? It feels like your breathing is a little quick..."

"Frankly speaking, I'm not entirely okay. Ever since a while ago, I've been desperately suppressing the urge to use «Tragic» to drag that guy out from the group of girls."

"..."

Haruaki could only pray in his heart, hoping she must endure no matter what.

"I don't quite understand, but are we going along together? It feels like a feudal lord's procession—" Kana remarked casually. "I never expected to find another target for a perfect crime apart from Haruaki." "But unlike Yachi, he's a total pretty boy." "Confronted with someone who lives in a completely different world, should we simply admit defeat?" Taizou and the boys were whispering to one another. In any case, Haruaki's group followed after Pakuaki's crowd, strolling through the Studio Park.

Pakuaki did not behave unusually. Only his retinue was screaming noisily without pause. Haruaki's group gradually got used to it and were able to divert some of their attention towards admiring the surrounding streets in addition to monitoring Pakuaki's movements. Naturally, only Kirika was still pressing her right palm against her chest, breathing rapidly.

Just at this moment, a banner with the words "Shinsengumi Garrison" leapt into Haruaki's view. Rather than the outdoor film set from earlier that resembled a gate, this was a souvenir vending area that used the name to sell Shinsengumi paraphernalia. Given two locations with the same name, wouldn't people get confused when deciding on a place to meet up? Although it did not affect him, Haruaki still felt a little worried.

But putting that aside, there was only one reason why Haruaki noticed that vending area despite having no particular interest in the Shinsengumi. That was because he saw her again—under such circumstances, "again" was definitely an appropriate word to use.

Tiptoeing in front of the cash register, the girl dressed in Wa Lolita attire was paying for her purchase.

"...Bag not needed."

"Oh, okay."

Haruaki heard the above exchange. Haruaki found her manner of speaking a little strange, but at the same time, what a good girl, being so

environmentally friendly. Next, the girl received her goods and turned to leave. Haruaki could see her contented expression and the pale blue fabric hanging on her arm. This time, the girl still did not notice Haruaki and disappeared into the crowd.

Fate really must be bring us together, I guess she's truly a fan of the Shinsengumi—While thinking that, Haruaki turned his gaze ahead, only to see Pakuaki saying something to the surrounding girls. Then he heard: "Eh~" "Please come back soon~" "Got it got it!" Then Pakuaki waved lightly to the girls and slowed down his pace. In other words—

"Hi hi, hello again. Would you like to chat for a bit?"

He was now walking side by side with Haruaki. Not knowing what Pakuaki was up to, Haruaki made a troubled expression.

"S-Sure..."

"You don't need to be so wary, it's just a casual chat. I'm not going to do anything strange—It can't be helped under such circumstances. Wouldn't you agree?"

Pakuaki shrugged and surveyed his surroundings slightly with a wry smile. More accurately, he looked towards Fear and the others who had shifted their positions imperceptibly to encircle him on the other three sides.

"If you think you are still able to play any tricks behind my back, please be my guest."

"Judging from this position, I don't think anyone will notice even if I extend «Tragic» to break your neck in an instant. It's worth a try."

"Pointed at your back right now is the corner of a Rubik's cube, but that might transform into a drill's tip any time. You are very welcome to tell me with your attitude, which pointy tip do you prefer?"

Pakuaki raised his arms lightly and shook them repeatedly as though surrendering.

"Like I said, this really is just casual chatting. Such heavy mistrust—So, how has school life been ever since promoting to the second year of high school?"

"Nothing much... Very ordinary."

Given their relationship, there was no need to use polite speech with Pakuaki. Haruaki answered hesitantly but Pakuaki did not mind Haruaki's answering attitude. Smiling pleasantly, he continued:

"Ohoh, what kind of ordinary? I'm very curious. Oh right, which subject do you like...?"

The tense chatting persisted. Haruaki's fatigue was accumulating unnecessarily because he could not help but ponder deeply every time whether Pakuaki's questions carried alternative meanings. Fear and Konoha would occasionally interject for restraining purposes, but Kirika remained silent all along.

How uncomfortable. But it was nothing more than discomfort. Haruaki took out his cellphone to check the time. The gathering time would arrive shortly, which meant that Pakuaki should be leaving, probably—

"Ohoh, I see. Also... Oh right. Speaking of high school life, there's an important element that's inseparable no matter what. So, allow me to ask while I'm at it. Do you have a girlfriend? Haha, despite how I may look now, I was quite popular back in my school days, you know? So I can more or less give you some pointers. How about that?"

Haruaki could feel Fear and the girls perking up their ears simultaneously.

"N-No thanks—It's okay."

"Oh? In other words, you don't have a girlfriend yet? Now that's totally unknown territory... To be honest, I can't understand it at all. There are clearly so many attractive girls by your side."

Saying the same stuff as Taizou and the guys—Haruaki thought. For some reason, this topic was brought up particularly frequently during this school excursion.

"You can't mean to tell me that there's not even one attractive girl around you? Reflect on this more carefully. It doesn't need to be attractiveness that's universally recognized. Being attractive to you is enough. What do you consider the most important? Looks, personality, figure, voice, interests, wealth, future potential, cooking skills... There are simply too many examples to list. By the way, I believe that the top candidate who'll be an excellent match for you is—mmmmphhhh!"

"Your... tie... is a bit crooked. Let me help you... fix it."

Walking over to Pakuaki's side, Kirika reached out towards his neck, a terrifyingly cold smile on her face. Her eyes were not smiling at all. Completely emotionless, her voice simply assembled words together to form an excuse.

While Kirika raised her arms and pretended to adjust Pakuaki's collar, the black belt slid out, wrapping itself tightly around his neck. Smiling wryly, Pakuaki lightly tapped Kirika's arm, causing her to fling her arm as though exclaiming "disgusting," finally releasing his restraints. Due to everything happening in an instant, people in the surroundings did not seem to notice. Only Un Izoey, who was walking beside them, shuddered but fortunately, she did not take any further or direct action. Did she dismiss it as purely love between siblings?

"C-Cough... C-Cough... Oh my, that's going a bit far."

"It's your fault for saying something stupid—How absolutely ridiculous. I have once again confirmed that there is absolutely no value even in chatting with you. Neither is there any reason for allowing you to do so."

"Yeah... Very well said. Droning on and on about boring things, even I felt impatient just from listening. If Kirika hadn't acted, I was about to fix you up with this."

"Agreed. In any case, free time is almost coming to an end. You should go back to wherever you're supposed to be, shouldn't you?"

"No helping it... Then in the remaining time, I guess I'll simply chat with cute high school girls. Besides, I promised them just now that I'll return to them immediately."

Contemptible pervert! Just as Kirika scolded quietly in fury—

"...Oh dear?"

Fear exclaimed in surprise. Haruaki followed her gaze to see ahead in a side street what appeared to be staff rushing past, carrying a stretcher. Lying on the stretcher was someone collapsed and completely drained of strength.

"Feeling unwell... Another heat stroke?"

"We've seen quite a lot of people getting heat stroke ever since coming to Kyoto. After all, since the weather has been so sunny, it can't be helped."

Just as Haruaki and Konoha had this exchange, Pakuaki remarked quietly, the corners of his lips seemingly curling in a grin:

"Heat stroke... huh?"

But then Pakuaki immediately widened his strides and walked in front of Haruaki's group.

Then without looking back at all, he waved goodbye while quickening his pace to catch up with the girls ahead.

Part 3

Everyone returned to the same hotel as last night's and had dinner. Then the teacher issued an announcement:

"Last night, I discovered boys going to the girls' rooms and making too much noise. Hence, from today onwards, visits to the rooms of the opposite gender are prohibited completely. If you want to chat, do so in the lobby. That is all."

"Th-Then what's gonna happen to my plan of 'gradually growing closer with girls, ultimately having heart-racing and candid conversations in their rooms'...! If only I knew this was going to happen, I'd have demanded forcefully to play cards in the girls' rooms last night—!"

His plan foiled, Taizou was greatly crushed, but upon further thought, Haruaki concluded that this was actually a foreseeable result. Furthermore, although he felt bad for Taizou, there was probably no chance for playing cards in the lobby tonight either. This was because Haruaki's group still had extremely important things to do.

"You guys go take a bath first. I'll go by myself later, so don't worry about me." After saying that to Taizou and the guys, Haruaki went downstairs to the lobby. Fear, Konoha and Kirika were already waiting at an inconspicuous spot.

"How swift of you. How did you explain to Kana?"

"We told her directly that we had other things to do so we couldn't go to the bath with her, so she should find others to accompany her. As expected, she was very curious but we managed to gloss over the matter. We also asked her not to tell the teacher. The price consisted of dessert coupons for the cafeteria."

"It's good that we successfully appeased Kana, but on further thought, with three out of four members in the group missing, it's too suspicious no matter what... Will this be okay?"

"The appointed rendezvous location is not too far away and all we're doing is picking up that thing. No matter how slow, we should be able to hurry back before the bedtime roll call."

"We should barely manage to pull through as long as we avoid attracting the teachers' attention before roll call. Kana's wide circle of friends should make it easy for her to mix herself into other groups inconspicuously. Although it's striking if she's seen standing around alone, it might be more advantageous if it feels like the entire group vanished."

Of course, going out without informing the teachers was forbidden. It was probably possible to persuade Kaidou-sensei if they happened to get caught by her and confessed honestly, but encountering other teachers would be bad. Hence, the group sneaked towards the lobby entrance while paying attention to surrounding gazes then ran out the automatic doors all at once. Escaping successfully, it felt sort of like being a spy.

The appointed location was a nearby park. Despite being called a park, it was not the type of ordinary park with swings and leisure equipment but more like a vast nature park. Using a map she had brought, Kirika confirmed the location and they finally arrived after walking a fair amount through the night. At night, the nature park seemed to meld with the dark forest. Naturally, there were no signs of casual visitors.

In the center of this quiet and isolated space, beneath the faint illumination of a street lamp, two people were already sitting on a bench, waiting for them. Gone were the aprons and the kerchiefs. These two people looked as though they were the same as before, except with minor changes in their casual attire, reminding the viewer of the passage of time since autumn of last year.

"Good evening. What nice weather we have tonight."

Bivorio spoke as though starting a tea party. Kururi rested her elbows on her thighs while acknowledging their arrival most reluctantly.

"I'm here. Let's confirm first. Is it really okay for us to be present?"

"I have already contacted the supplier. Since he did not demand a change in time or location, it means that your presence is fine. It's possible that he might even want to explore new sources for customers."

"I will actually consider it if he's able to obtain Indulgence Disks in the future. Apart from that, if he knows where I can get my hands on extremely rare and legendary rice crackers, that'd be even better."

At this moment, Kururi suddenly got up from the bench and lazily indicated a certain direction with her thumb. Konoha had already turned her head to look towards that direction.

"He's here."

"Hi, Alice Bivorio Basskreigh. How are you doing? It's been a long time since I last saw you in person. Cheers to this wholesome reunion, bravo!"

"Yes, it really has been ages."

Bivorio also stood up from the bench to welcome the person who had appeared in the darkness. Haruaki's first impression of the man, to be honest, was that of Santa Claus. The new arrival was a middle-aged foreigner with a plump build, jovial and friendly facial features and a long, striking, white beard. The image would be even perfect had he been wearing a red suit decorated with furry balls, but in actual fact, he was wearing jeans, a flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up and a New York Yankees baseball cap. With a backpack and a camera, he looked like a typical foreign tourist. If there really existed a Santa Claus who used his spring break to go sightseeing in Japan, it could be no one else but this man.

"Allow me to make introductions. This here is the 'supplier and information broker' I mentioned. And these people here are—"

"Cheers to this happy encounter, bravo! You don't need to make special introductions for each of them. I recognize them all. Rather, it'd be a taint to my reputation as an information broker if I didn't know. Fear-in-Cube... Oh, sorry, it's Miss Fear Cubrick, Miss Konoha whose family is best left unsaid, Miss Ueno Kirika who is nothing more than that, as well as—"

The information broker's down-turned eyes looked at Haruaki then closed partially in a jovial and gentle manner.

"I see, I see. Although it's my first time to see you in person, you definitely resemble Yachi Honatsu very much. Cheers to this encounter of fate, bravo."

After hearing this, Haruaki was surprised from the bottom of his heart.

"Eh? Excuse me... You know... my Old Pops?"

"Because we are in a similar line of work, we have met a number of times at least. Rather, we can be considered business competitors as well. After all, enemies are allies in this business and allies, enemies. This sort of thing is totally commonplace—"

Similar line of work? Business competitors?

Haruaki was suddenly reminded of the fact that he virtually knew nothing of his father's work. Ever since a long time ago, his father had been running all over the world, looking for cursed tools then bringing them back and keeping them in the storeroom at home so that their curses could be lifted given plenty of time. That was all his father had been doing all along. Although there were vague impressions in Haruaki's mind, even to this day, Haruaki still had no idea what specifically his father did for a living.

"Uh... It seems quite inappropriate to ask someone I'm meeting for the first time, but my Old Pops..."

"Okay okay, child, let's not be so hasty. Allow me to finish the job first before we talk further... Since I'm getting old, I have to finish what I'm supposed to do as quickly as possible before I forget. Although there are some things which are better off forgotten, like the cruelty of my second wife. Cheers to forgetfulness that has become God-granted salvation, bravo!"

Laughing heartily, he rummaged through the small pouch at his waist.

"Job? It must be that, right!? Very good... Hurry and give it to me!"

"Please be patient, Miss Fear. In this line of business where there are no contracts, doing things according to procedure is the most important... All we can do is hand supplies over to the client. How the client wishes to handle what they have received is none of our business."

"Yes, indeed, procedures must be followed."

Kururi shrugged and approached the information broker. "This is it, this is it." The object the information broker fished out from his pouch was undoubtedly—

"An Indulgence Disk...! How did you get it?"

"Hahaha, asking a supplier this kind of question, that's really difficult for me to answer. I'd be out of business if I told you. However, I can tell you one thing. This really took a very very very very great deal of effort on my part. Especially when these things have become even harder to come by in recent times. Cheers to my fortune from the god of commerce, bravo!"

"Just shut up with the noise... So freaking incompetent."

Kururi frowned and sighed, then reached out, grabbing the Indulgence Disk held between the guy's fingertips.

But in the next instant—

"...Eh?"

Failing to understand what happened, Haruaki could only blink repeatedly in rapid succession.

Why?

Why was Kururi currently sending a kick to the supplier with full force?

Part 4

Fear was watching this scene unfold.

Struck by Kururi's forward kick, the man flew backwards several meters. Kururi rolled backwards from the recoil.

At the same time, another figure descended with astounding speed between those two. Kururi had rolled several times on the ground to pull back, then got up by kneeling with one knee drawn up. Taking out a switchblade from her pocket, she whispered:

"Freaking incompetent. Fighting scenes need professional training, you know...!?"

Fear understood the situation. It was an enemy. An enemy had appeared. Hence, Kururi had no choice but to kick the supplier away in that instant to protect him.

Fear took out her Rubik's cube from her tracksuit's pocket. In the pocket on the other side was a precious treasure, the other cube she kept on her person and regarded as her talisman, but one cube was enough for now. Using another would be extremely dangerous. She had this self-awareness. If possible, she did not want to employ it.

Fear took a deep breath, clutching the cube tightly at the same time.

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»—Curse Calling!"

Then she launched the execution stake at the figure that had appeared. The enemy jumped as though spinning, evading successfully and effortlessly, then landing in a forward crouching manner like a beast. Finally, they had a chance to catch a glimpse of the enemy's appearance.

It was a strange girl who was dressed in an outfit with traditional Japanese-style patterns yet covered with fluttering frills.

"Wait a sec... You're that girl!"

Fear pulled the execution stake back using the chain of cubes while glancing at Haruaki who had yelled out strangely.

"Hey Haruaki, you can't mean to tell me that you know her?"

"No, it's just that I've seen her several times yesterday and today... She also appeared at Nara Park and the Studio Park where she even bought that haori she's wearing now. Why is she here?"

Indeed, on top of the girl's frilly Japanese-style outfit, she was wearing a haori with alternating colors of white and pale blue. Due to learning many things during the daytime, even Fear now recognized it for what it was—A Shinsengumi haori.

"In other words, she's been following us. How absolutely ridiculous...!"

"It appears that it is not coincidence that she passed by and happened to descend from the sky. What exactly are your intentions! Speak your purpose now!"

The instant Konoha spoke, the girl's eyes seemed to narrow in an inexorably sharp manner. Then with very vicious and intimidating emotions, she glared at Konoha.

"Mura... masa...!"

Those eyes conveyed completely undisguised wrath, hatred and contempt. Probably troubled by the girl's excessively overt gaze, Konoha paused her movements for an instant. But Fear did not stop.

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»!"

No matter what, the enemy was definitely hostile. Were it not for Kururi's forceful kick, the supplier would likely have died already from the high speed descent that was enough to kill someone. Disregarding whether she had achieved her goal or not, the concrete ground where she landed was already curled up in a tragic manner.



There was no need to hold back. Fear made a thrust towards her using the drill.

"Take this!"

"Sh—!"

A brief exhale. The enemy's movements were very simple. Using her right hand that spread open naturally, she slapped the drill's sharp tip and forcibly deflected it. Her left hand also opened up flexibly to spread her five fingers, extending forward in a posture like a beast's claws to strike at Fear—But just as Fear thought that, the girl's left hand was swung horizontally.

Approaching them, Kururi gasped, "seeing through" the attack just when it was so close it was about to connect. Many strands of hair from her bangs were sliced and fluttered in the air.

"Stand back! You can't handle her! This girl is one of our kind!"

Since she was able to deflect the drill barehanded, there was naturally only one possibility. Moreover, this was not a feat that any humanoid cursed tool could accomplish. For example, Kuroe and Sovereignty would not be capable of this. Indeed, to be able to do this—

"Ooooooooooh!"

The girl howled softly and attacked with the "claws" of both hands. Next came a wave of astounding, battering blows. Fear blocked them while retreating. Despite the redundancy, a helper stepped forward.

"I remember that posture of the hand, it's called the tiger's claw... Are you a Chinese martial arts fanatic!?"

"Mura...!"

The girl glared viciously again. It felt like the fighting spirit exuding from all over her body was burning even more intensely. The girl used one hand's tiger claw to sweep Fear's drill away while blocking Konoha's karate chop with her other arm. Meanwhile, her skirt, resembling a fluttering yukata, flew up as she counterattacked with a flying kick. Konoha used her unoccupied arm to block the flying kick, resulting in a loud crash that one could hardly believe came from the collision between bodies of flesh and blood. Although this was perfectly commonplace for them, Konoha was frowning with a troubled expression for some reason.

After deflecting each other's attacks, they pulled some distance apart slightly and paused for an instant. The girl's eyes were almost glued on Konoha, glaring at her. So not fun at all—Fear thought. But at this moment, the enemy suddenly shifted her gaze. However, rather than towards Fear, the formidable enemy who was more powerful than Konoha, it was—

"Guh... Oeeeeeee, cheers to good fortune saving my neck, bravo. What on earth happened...?"

"Hurry and escape directly! The enemy's target is most likely the Indulgence Disk dropped over there!"

Kirika yelled loudly. Then Bivorio added with a serious demeanor:

"Since you have already handed the Indulgence Disk to us, your job is complete! What follows is our own problem—Please hurry and escape!"

"I really hate growing old... I used to be quite the influential person, a man of brawn who could rival those guys from the Draconians. Very well, please pay for the goods using the same old method as usual! Cheers to my hopes for the next business deal after this, bravo!"

The information broker rushed into the bush. The girl did not pursue him, presumably because her goal was indeed what Kirika had pointed out. Probably because her purpose was exposed, the girl suddenly changed in attitude dramatically and started to rush as quickly as she could towards the Indulgence Disk that had fallen quite some distance away from everyone.

"«Tragic Black River»!"

"—Give up!"

Kirika extended her belt, trying to get a head start, but the girl used a tiger-clawed strike to viciously sever the belt. The slicing technique was extremely violent and barbaric.

The girl continued to make a mad dash. Just as she was about to pick up the Indulgence Disk, fueled by such vigor—

"Don't think you'll succeed—! Mechanism No.4 swinging type, oscillatory form: «The Pendulum», Curse Calling!"

"!"

Sticking close to the ground, Fear swung the pendulum's massive scythe blade that resulted from the transformation, sweeping up the Indulgence Disk that had fallen on the ground. Although this caused the Indulgence Disk to fly high into the air in another direction, at least it was better than letting the enemy obtain it.

"Woah... Hold on, that's very dangerous! Please consider the timing and location carefully!"

The enemy effortlessly stepped over the giant pendulum scythe that was slicing at her ankles, but being in the area, Konoha was faced with the same threat. Jumping upwards, she voiced her grievances at Fear.

"Shut up, the important thing is that it flew over there! Hurry and catch it! The enemy is chasing after it, so hurry and find a solution!"

"Seriously, always ordering others around...!"

"—!"

Konoha and the enemy clashed at the predicted landing spot for the Indulgence Disk. Karate chops and tiger-clawed strikes collided repeatedly to produce acute sounds of impact in an intense battle. An unarmed brawl involving both arms and legs. Instantly, Fear was struck by a sense of dissonance. Seeing the way the two girls were fighting, Fear was struck by a certain unbelievable feeling.

She had witnessed Konoha fighting countless times in the past. Knife hand thrusts and attacks honed and trained to near perfection. Resisting her, the enemy employed what were known as tiger claws, with naturally curled fingers and forceful, well-honed strikes. Incredible resilience could be felt from the girl's slender body.

The two girls were taking a long time to decide the victor. Thus, the Indulgence Disk fell amidst their chaotic battle. A new element, the Indulgence Disk, was added to the exchange of offense and defense. An attempt to catch it. Prevention. Deflection. An attempt to catch it. A feint—The Disk danced and flew between the movements of the two girls' limbs. Don't break it—Just as Fear prayed in her heart and was about to join in the fray—

"Oh no, not again! Be more careful, Cow Tits!"

Probably due to the unusual forces from the two girls' attacks, the Indulgence Disk did not reach the ground even once, gaining new kinetic energy repeatedly, tracing out another high parabola and flying off somewhere.

"Damn it...!"

"Looks like coming here alone was a mistake!"

While the enemy was staring at the Indulgence Disk, Konoha seized the opening to send the girl flying with a palm strike. The girl pressed the soles of her feet firmly against the ground, producing intense friction while at the same time striving to prevent herself from falling over. Nevertheless, her body still flew backwards nonstop until she finally reached out and hooked her arm on a street lamp on the side, forcibly halting the movement of her body. Looking like nothing more than "a push," the attack should not have caused any damage, but simply creating distance alone was enough. Indeed, as long as the Indulgence Disk remained on their side, it did not matter who picked it up.

"You're the closest, so I'm counting on you!"

As it happened, Kirika was closest to the Disk and started running as fast as she could. Judging from the enemy's current position, the girl definitely could not get there in time. Got it—Just as Fear was thinking that...

A strange snapping sound was heard.

Using her bare hands, the girl had sliced the street lamp into two.

Her gaze was focused intently on Kirika who was about to pick up the Indulgence Disk. Zzzt—Cut off from electrical power, the street lamp instantly went dark, causing the color of the night to intensify even more.

In a space shrouded by new shadows, the girl lifted the street lamp onto her shoulder—

Licking the surface of the street lamp, she then murmured softly:

"Go forth and pierce, my will—!"

A foreboding premonition suddenly raced across Fear's spine. Konoha also displayed sudden alarm on her face.

"Kirika! Watch out...!"

But it was too late. Arching her body back to accumulate power, the enemy then poured her full strength into the street lamp on her shoulder, launching it forward.

Instead of flying straight like a javelin, the street lamp rotated as it flew without sufficient directionality. Then simply brushing past Kirika's shoulder just as she was about to pick up the Indulgence Disk—

"...! A-AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

It severed Kirika's arm cleanly at its base.

"C-Class Rep—!"

Fear heard Haruaki's exclamation of surprise. She also heard Kirika's scream and Konoha's gasp.

Due to external, physical force, the palm, which had lost the concept of gripping, swatted the Indulgence Disk away. Spewing a certain dark red liquid that melded into the darkness, Kirika's severed arm spun in circles as it flew backwards. Spinning, spinning, spinning—

Then—It did not fall to the ground.

What was heard was not the thud of her arm striking the ground.

Instead, it was a sound of "wow" that was much quieter than the sound of a collision. It was also accompanied by the sound of speaking.

"Oh dear... Could this situation be considered a long-absent chance for skin contact between siblings?"

Judging from the current circumstances, Yamimagari Pakuaki emerged from the surrounding darkness without prior warning, exactly as his name implied.^[8] Looking not particularly surprised, he readily caught his flesh-and-blood sister's severed arm.

"What the heck...!?"

Incomprehensible. Why was he here? What was he doing? What did he come here to do?

"That guy, back during the cultural festival... The incompetent... Lab Chief's Nation's...!"

"—Yamimagari Pakuaki! Why are you here!?"

Seeing his arrival, Bivorio and Kururi stared in wide-eyed shock. Ever since the face off during the cultural festival, this was probably their first time encountering Yamimagari Pakuaki again. Hence, they were extremely surprised as one would expect.

However, Pakuaki simply glanced at the situation but still spoke in a very casual tone of voice. Most unbelievably, he was holding Kirika's arm and pointing it forward like a conductor's baton.

"Developments have become so interesting that I am greatly touched. Why did it become like this? What should happen next—These unknowns truly rouse my curiosity. In any case, Un Izoey, can you first bring that over to me now? That object seems to be the crux of the matter."

"...Affirmative."

Naturally, Un Izoey was following behind Pakuaki. Dressed in a lab coat and a tribal skirt, her attire indicated her identity as a member of the Lab Chief's Nation.

Next, a dark-skinned beast charged forward. Without waiting to confirm the result, the enemy girl had started running at full speed the instant she launched the street lamp. At this moment, Un Izoey and the girl met each other at the place where the Indulgence Disk had fallen on the ground after bouncing off Kirika's palm. The knife-wielding foot and the girl's tiger claws were engaged in fierce combat at incredible speed, faster than the naked eye could follow. After a few exchanges, both sides jumped backwards at the same time, pulling back slightly. Then Un Izoey's knife could be heard falling on the ground between them.

However, this did not mean that Un Izoey had lost. In the battle just now, neither side had gained the upper hand over the other. The knife had dropped simply because Un Izoey chose to make a tradeoff.

"I make a statement: giving the explanation that the current goal is not a hunt to kill prey. Like stealing an egg from a ba-oon's nest. My side gaining the advantage is obvious beyond obvious."

Taking the place of the knife between her toes was the Indulgence Disk. Obviously, rather than bending over to pick up by hand, it was faster for Un Izoey to grab the prize with her feet that were as nimble as her hands. She had prioritized the execution of Pakuaki's command.

"Un Izoey...!"

In the end, the Indulgence Disk had neither fallen into the hands of Fear's side nor the enemy girl, but unbelievably, the third party—the Lab Chief's Nation. Fear gripped her torture instrument tightly, glaring at Un Izoey while preparing a stance to engage in battle. However—

"Please don't come over. I request such a request."

Un Izoey was frowning and spoke with some reluctance. She looked like she was in a real dilemma. Hence, the notion of "taking it back by force at all costs" in Fear's heart was weakened slightly in an instant.

Nevertheless, the enemy girl could not possibly hesitate for the same reason.

"Return it!"

"I refute: giving the response that this object does not belong to you!"

Un Izoey tossed the Indulgence Disk at Pakuaki behind her while drawing another knife from under her skirt. The girl chased after the Indulgence Disk and approached Pakuaki, but Un Izoey went forward to intercept her, of course. The two began to engage each other in a deadly dance as before. Un Izoey should be able to focus on fighting even more than just now, but there was no change in the tides of battle. This implied that the enemy's skills and capabilities were definitely authentic.

The girl had fought Konoha head on and was now engaged in direct combat with Un Izoey.

Nevertheless, she did not show any signs of being intimidated or overwhelmed.

She simply displayed those eyes filled with vigor and a beast-like sense of competitiveness.

—As well as willpower as strong and firm as refined steel.

"Take this—!"

"! ...I speculate that this is a lapella that might be a little tough to defeat..."

The two pulled apart again, resulting in a brief pause on the battlefield.

As though waiting for this precise moment, Pakuaki spoke up in a confident and leisurely manner:

"Okay—stop, stop. Let's time out for a break. Oh, allow me to return this to you. Although it should grow back even if you leave it unattended, reattaching the arm to regenerate should be faster... Because it's been thoroughly tested in experiments before, do you still remember?"

Pakuaki gripped the palm of Kirika's severed arm as though shaking hands before casually tossing it back at Kirika. Sitting on the ground in a crouched position, Kirika was looking up towards him, glaring fiercely while barely managing to catch the arm. A curse known as wrath, a curse known as hatred, a curse known as malice. In Kirika's eyes, all that existed were curses.

However, this was the same for Fear and Konoha as well. They were simply glaring at Pakuaki. Despite feeling unwell due to Kirika's bleeding, Konoha still glared at him.

Having exhibited behavior that indicated how different he was from normal people, Pakuaki had now gained control over the entire situation. Everyone had no choice but to look towards him. Perhaps this was his true motive. Even the enemy girl stopped her movements and glared at Pakuaki as well.

Pakuaki seemed to enjoy her staring. Spreading his hands lightly to the sides, he said:

"Well then... You have things you want to do, but I have mine as well. Using this time for respite, may I satisfy my desire first? Namely, to elucidate a simple unknown. It goes without saying, I am referring to you, of course... Could you at least tell me your name?"

The girl's gaze shifted lightly to the side.

...From the Indulgence Disk in Pakuaki's hand towards another woman. The Japanese sword with the giant bust that stood as an affront to the eyes.

The girl slowly took a breath and one could hear a certain emotion about to overflow despite her attempts to suppress it.

"Very well, mine appellation be..."

Then in an archaic manner of speech that poorly matched her appearance—

Her sharp gaze, akin to the sharpened edge of a steel blade, continued to glare at Konoha while she spoke:

"—Kotetsu. Nagasone Kotetsu."^[9]

Chapter 3 - Time of Continual Vermilion / "the shrine where there are fortune-telling stones"

Part 1

I really hate growing old—He thought to himself.

I can't believe I have no choice but to leave behind these boys and girls who are young enough to be my children—but among them are a few who look young despite having existed for several times the years I've lived—while running away on my own in such an unsightly manner.

Not only that, but even worse—

I can't believe I ran into someone who's lying in ambush while I was escaping, and now I've no choice but to stand still without any options.

I didn't even try to resist. I did nothing. As a supplier and an information broker, danger was a daily part of the job. I always prepare a number of plans, tools and information that I could use to escape this sort of crisis. I've relied on such means to survive many challenging situations in the past.

Nevertheless, in spite of that—

Simply facing off, I understood that those things are completely meaningless as well as the fact that the person before my eyes is not someone who can be deceived so easily. I even found it impossible to muster the notion of resistance.

This character before my eyes was shrugging as though in a reluctant situation while taking a step forward.

"...How roundabout, because I must not make an appearance before everyone."

Inescapable. My view was blocked. What has this person done? Or have I simply closed my eyes? I can't even be sure of this fact.

"But precisely because of this, I must properly do what I can do. There are no limits to familiarity and training—You shall serve as my foundation!"

As I heard these words, a feeling akin to dizziness attacked me.

Then my consciousness turned into complete darkness.

I woke up.

"...Oh my?"

Lying on the roadside, I sat up suddenly, checking out my surroundings in puzzlement.

"How odd, where is this? I'm supposed to be in Venice."

At the very least, this is no longer within Italy's boundaries. The climate is completely different. China? No, it's Japan. I can tell from the scraps of newspaper hanging on the utility pole.

How terrible, it looks like I'm really starting to get senile. Or was it because I was drinking? It's probably the latter. Unless I was drunk, I can't imagine any other reason how I could take a flight all the way to the far end of Asia without noticing. Besides, I totally have no need of making a trip to Japan.

Placing a hand on my forehead, I sighed deeply.

Man, I promise I'll definitely quit drinking.

Part 2

"Kotetsu...?"

"Hey Haruaki, what's wrong? You've heard this name before?"

"Yeah, I should say it's actually quite famous."

After answering Fear, Haruaki glanced at Konoha. She seemed a bit uncomfortable but was still staring at the Wa Lolita girl with complicated emotions in her eyes.

"Fear-san, perhaps you may not know, but that is a Japanese sword. Just like me."

"I am... not the same as you! Don't compare me with you, Muramasa!"

The girl—Kotetsu—glared even more viciously at Konoha. Just as Konoha frowned—

"They should be the same. Although inferior to Konoha-kun, it is quite a renowned sword in history... After all, with quite a number of legends passed down, it comes as no surprise that the sword is cursed. Take

Endou Isami for example—I see now, that's why you're wearing a Shinsengumi haori...?"

"C-Class Rep, are you alright? Don't push yourself!"

"In any case, the arm is already connected for the most part. I'll be able to move it as normal after a few more minutes. But the torn tracksuit jacket can't return to its former state, how absolutely ridiculous..."

Kirika was still pressing her other hand on the severed arm, but had already stood up.

Kotetsu frowned slightly and spoke. Putting her manner of speaking aside, her voice itself was extremely adorable.

"Do not carelessly address Isami-sama by his direct name, girl."

"To us, he's just a character in history. Do you still bear loyalty towards a former owner?"

"Rather than loyalty, what I insist upon is merely the minimum level of manners and respect."

"Including that haori?"

"Th-This is just because I think it looks very dignified when... I wear it. Truth be told, that is all."

Kotetsu whispered gruffly then shifted her vigorous gaze. First towards Konoha—the fellow sword whom she regarded with hostility for some reason—then reluctantly, she forcibly pulled her gaze away and towards the man as though saying "compared to Konoha right now, this side is more important."

"Kotetsu, Nagasone Kotetsu, isn't that right...? I see. The unknown is now known. Thank you."

"I have already reported my name. Hand it over now!"

"Unfortunately, there is no logical connection between these two sentences. By the way, may I ask why you want this object so much?"

"I cannot say. Hurry and hand it over."

"I thought so too. But at the very least, I know that you desire this greatly... So, what should I do—?"

Pakuaki waved the Indulgence Disk in front of him as though watching a good show. Kotetsu's eyes narrowed with impatience.

Just at this moment—

"—Yamimagari Pakuaki, that belongs to us originally."

"Hi, Alice Bivorio Basskreigh. It's been a while."

"Relations between us are probably nowhere amicable enough for cheerful pleasantries... Please return it to us."

In contrast to the serious Bivorio, Pakuaki snickered:

"Of course, my answer is no. I believe you already understood ages ago."

At this moment, Kururi glanced at Haruaki's group before saying to Bivorio:

"Now that things have reached this point... We might as well use that thing directly as a bargaining chip for negotiations, right?"

"Well—"

"Hey, hold on! That's not what we agreed on! Even though we haven't done anything for you yet!"

Fear began to yell and holler, but Pakuaki heard what Kururi said and answered in carefree manner:

"Negotiations? I see... I understand, I understand. Your goal is that Hinai Elsie, isn't it? Indeed, she is currently in our hands. Hence, you originally intended to hand this over to Fear-in-Cube's faction then request that they serve as a go-between for negotiations. Truly a rational and correct decision. Indeed, having lost innumerable important facilities and researchers to your suicide bombing attacks, the Lab Chief's Nation absolutely cannot negotiate with your side directly. Your understanding regarding this fact is absolutely correct in judgment. Among the researchers, there are still many who bear resentment towards your side. There are even people who strongly advocate for Hinai Elsie to be violated and killed, then used as experimental materials. As the leader of the Lab Chief's Nation, I really cannot ignore their demands."

Pakuaki then said: "Furthermore, by this juncture, we have already researched this object quite thoroughly and have no particular desire for it."

In other words, trying to use this Indulgence Disk to exchange for the release of Hinai Elsie was completely out of the question.

"Since you don't want it, why did you take it!? Stop doing unnecessary things and hand it over now, then leave immediately!"

"Oh? Fear-in-Cube, I never expected you to be so serious. This object shouldn't be that rare in your eyes. You must have a quite a number of them in your possession already. Even you, why do you want it so much as well?"

"None of your business. However, now that things have come to this, giving half-assed responses probably won't help so I will tell you clearly. Yes, you are right. I want that thing and hope to obtain it. Do you know why I'm specifically admitting to this? Naturally, that's in order to tell you that I won't compromise on this at all. No matter what means I must resort to!"

Fear glared at Pakuaki and exuded inexorably serious vigor, her eyes filled with uncompromising determination.

Gripping the transformed drill in her hand tightly, she prepared a battle stance.

Her words and attitude exhibited only one thing, her resolute will.

Indeed, Fear had already obtained several others of the Indulgence Disk that Pakuaki was currently holding between his fingertips. Whether in size, weight, material or effects, it was surely identical to the other Indulgence Disks from the past.

But from the perspective of the current Fear—

For the current Fear who desired Indulgence Disks in a concrete sense, based on her own determination and newly discovered goal—

That Indulgence Disk was undoubtedly an irreplaceable treasure.

A most crucial target that absolutely must not slip out of her grasp.

Hence, Haruaki could only support her determination and act accordingly. Despite knowing clearly he did not have any power, he still put up an offensive stance so as to be ready to take action in case Pakuaki showed an opening that allowed the Indulgence Disk to be taken. Given the current mood, a battle could break out any moment. Anything could happen next.

"Hmm. Indeed, in your case, no matter how potent the curse-reducing effect, it would still be considered insufficient... Hence it's not like I can't understand why you desire this type of object. Nevertheless, even if you make clear your intentions, my position still will not change. Regarding the question you just posed—in other words, why am I taking it despite having no desire for it, I must answer: Because I am currently pondering how to deal with it. So, what should be done? Truly an unknown. Due to the grudge against the Family, I can't simply hand it over obediently. As for you guys who wish to help the Family, it pretty much goes the same... But that said, it would not be too appropriate for me as a human to hand it over to Kotetsu who made a sudden appearance here. What a dilemma."

"As a human? Absolutely ridiculous—You stopped being human a long time ago. Since ages back, you have already fallen to become a type of creature that is even more ugly and disgusting."

"Kirika, don't say such heart breaking words. But... Oh right. When there is uncertainty over how a human ought to behave correctly, perhaps being a little mechanical might turn out to be better instead. Yes, so long as a fair chance is offered to both sides, it'll be fine. Uh, I remember placing that thing here—"

Pakuaki began to recollect on his own and started searching the pocket in his black lab coat. This was precisely the fourth dimensional pocket with the bizarre internal space that they had witnessed in the Studio Park earlier. One could also describe it as a wearable storeroom.

"Hmm—Not this one... Nor this either... Found it. To be honest, even I've almost forgotten its existence. Luckily, I've kept it in there all along because I thought it'd come in handy at some unknown point in time."

Hence, Pakuaki took out a box.

A small iron box roughly the size of a lunch box.

Immediately, with extremely natural motions, he placed the Indulgence Disk inside the box and closed the lid.

Seeing that, Fear yelled fiercely of course:

"W-What are you doing!?"

"Your side wants this, Kotetsu also wants this, but I have no reason to hand it over to either side. Seeing as I cannot make a decision here, I was

thinking I'd let you guys decide on your own. In other words, this is another long-awaited invitation to a game after last time's cultural festival. As for me, I'll be the witness providing the rules and the prize."

"A game, you say? Stop screwing around!"

"Truth be told, stop speaking nonsense! I have no time for games with you lot!"

Fear's and Kotetsu's roars overlapped. Their dangerous gazes also met for merely an instant.

"I hope all of you won't misunderstand. I am not doing this to make things difficult. This method is actually beneficial to everyone instead. Not only will I get a chance to be entertained as a spectator, but all of you will also get a fair and equitable chance. Three birds with one stone. In fact, I could simply take this thing away with me, even though I don't want it, but that would not benefit anyone, right?"

Pakuaki still held dominion over the situation. Haruaki and company could only glare at him while listening to him speak.

"A game...? In any case, I doubt it'll be a respectable game."

"Unlike last time, I won't say anything like there's a bomb that will explode. This time, the game is simple and without danger. So, allow me to explain the basic rules. First of all, this box—«Ganletti's Door»—is absolutely impossible to open under the current circumstances. Even if you try to use a sword or a torture instrument to break it, you won't succeed."

How will I know unless I try? —Fear's mutters could be heard, sounding like a beast's growls.

"There is only one method to open the box, namely by using the four special keys I have prepared. However, these keys cannot be used straight away. This is the most important rule: 'only the one who has activated the key's power is able to open this box.' Naturally, the fastest person wins. So, let me first distribute these keys to you."

Pakuaki proceeded to fish out small, rust-colored keys from his pocket to toss out to them one by one. First was Kotetsu. Despite frowning, she still caught the key reflexively. Next, Pakuaki threw two other keys towards Fear and Konoha. Fear cast an obvious glance of anger towards Pakuaki.

"I can't believe you placed it in that weird box... And the box can't be opened except using these keys? What the heck are you trying to scheme? Damn it, this is so maddening. But mad as I am—"

Gnashing her teeth, Fear moved her hand in displeasure as though trying to dash something towards the ground, but still she caught the key.

"If this is the only way to get the Indulgence Disk, then I have no choice but to do it! ...You don't need to participate!"

"Let's suppose I didn't catch it. But if that were the case, a certain excessively nice guy who wishes to help you will then proceed to catch this key of unknown origins. He absolutely will. Consequently, I have no choice."

Konoha whispered then lightly caught the key. Haruaki had no choice but to silently withdraw his half-extended arm.

Next, Pakuaki tossed the final key towards Kirika, who reached out using her newly reattached arm.

"...!"

But at this moment, Kirika frowned slightly with a twisted expression. Was her arm still hurting? Or was there some other reason? In any case, Kirika did not manage to catch the key thrown towards her. After striking Kirika's body, the key fell down.

Then Kururi stepped up from the side and picked it up.

Sighing, she scratched her head forcefully and said:

"For crying out loud, how freaking incompetent. Just like what the old guy said earlier, everything should follow proper procedure. We were clearly the ones who purchased the Indulgence Disk so it's not like we can hope to take it back without doing anything."

"Ah..."

"So let me have this key. I won't return it either."

Probably because she witnessed Kururi declaring resolutely and holding the key firmly in her hand, Kirika stopped saying what she originally intended to say and looked down. Seeing this scene, Pakuaki grinned wryly for some reason and shrugged:

"Very well. The participants' identities do not matter. Back to the topic at hand, those of you who received the keys should probably start feeling a sense of numbness by now. This is because the keys will automatically register you as the owner after you hold the keys and sustain a certain level of persistent contact."

"Registered...? Fear, are you feeling something?"

"Muu. There's a numb feeling. Also—"

"Same here. Also, the key was clearly covered in rust when I caught it, but now it's become clean simultaneously with the numb sensation."

On closer examination, the key in Konoha's hand was no longer the rust color seen earlier but pure white. The keys in Fear, Kururi and Kotetsu's hands had also turned pure white.

"This is proof that registration is complete. The keys are known as «Ganletti's Keys of Emotion». When the box and the keys are combined, its structure becomes very similar to a Wathe. Simply stated, the keys will react to the emotions of their respective registered owners and gradually turn red in color. Because the change is caused by the person in possession of the key, it serves as a measuring gauge. That should be easy to understand. Then once the continually rising emotional volume exceeds a certain required threshold, in other words, when a key turns bright red—Only then will the box accept that key and allow itself to be opened. Yes, very much in the style of a cursed tool, the keys will start to drip blood slowly once the limit is reached. You can also use that phenomenon as an indicator to judge."

"Emotional... volume? Absolutely nonsensical! What the heck are you talking about!?"

"Yamimagari Pakuaki, answer me now! What do you mean by emotional volume!?"

Fear's and Kotetsu's voices overlapped once again.

"There is no need for you two to question me so loudly as though you're about to fight. I will answer of course. Don't overthink things, it's exactly what the words mean literally. The volume of emotions. Any type of emotion will do. It doesn't have to be the typical emotions of joy, anger, pathos, and humor. Apart from that, hatred, wrath or displeasure will work as well, for example."

At the same time, Kotetsu cast her gaze towards her fellow sword, the same gaze she had repeatedly thrown at Konoha earlier. Presumably having decided to pay it no heed, Konoha nonchalantly ignored her.

Agitated, Fear said:

"Ha, that's truly a weird cursed tool. A key that cannot perform its duty unless emotions are stored up? Utterly nonsensical. I totally don't understand what's the point of the curse."

"This wasn't a box originally, but the keys and keyhole for a womanizer's residence."

Pakuaki proceeded to explain the keys' origins in a lively manner.

There was once a philanderer who gave out copied keys to a number of lovers, then told them: "Only the woman whose love for me is the strongest will be able to open the door to my home." The woman kept turning the keys while standing outside the house, declaring one after another how much they loved him. Hence, the man indulged himself in this sense of superiority. An ugly man of the worst, unfaithful type, taking pleasure in toying with women's hearts. In actual fact, he was simply holding down the door's lock from inside then deciding on his own whether or not to open the door, and only letting the woman who begged the most pitifully and subserviently to open the door. This god-like sense of superiority became an addiction for him.

But this behavior resulted in a tragedy at some point. The man's depravity had reached an unfortunate level while at the same time, his skills in making women fall in love with him had also reached a contemptible level.

The man gradually grew tired of this game. He found it tedious and found a new batch of lovers. In the end, even when the old lovers came to visit, none of them could open the door. Nevertheless, the old lovers still clung onto the notion that "it must be lacking in lubrication, how could my love be not enough? There's a way that not only lubricates but also exhibits my love. This will surely open the door."—They pierced their own bodies with the keys, then twisted and turned nonstop to dye the keys red with fresh blood.

"But by that time, perhaps that group of women had already been poisoned by their relationship with that man." Pakuaki added in a carefree manner.

"In the end, the women all became stalkers and kept trying to use those keys, smeared and covered with love, to open the door. Then destroying the door in an act irrelevant to love—naturally, in their minds, they had opened the door using the power of love—they broke in and the man finally died from excessive love. That's how the story goes."

"All I can say is: what an unsettling story. This man really was a public enemy of women."

"But as a result, this interesting Wathe was created. The cursed keyhole obtained this trait where it can only be opened by inserting and turning a key filled with emotions. After transplanting the keyhole portion and making modifications, this box was produced."

Pakuaki finished proudly with a "So..." and swept his gaze across everyone again.

"Starting from this moment, the keys will automatically sense your emotions. The trick to activating the keys faster is to recall your emotions honestly, act in ways loyal to your emotions and release your emotions without any pretense. Who will their key to an activated state the fastest and open this box? —That's the game this time. By the way, let me add to the explanation. The keys of emotion will absolutely not reset unless the registered owner dies or a special reset switch in the box is operated. Neither can the registrations be altered. Even if you wait patiently, the box will eventually be possible to open. But since there are competitors now, this will still turn into a race where the fastest person wins. Any questions?"

"Honestly, this game is totally nonsensical. I don't find it amusing at all. The simplest and fastest method is to beat you up right now and think of another solution. What do you think?"

Displaying half-serious eyes, Fear waved the drill in her hand. However, Un Izoey stepped forward in front of Pakuaki while her face seemed to be struggling to erase her emotions.

"I do have a reliable bodyguard. Also, it won't help even if you torment me, because I have no way of opening this box either. Only the keys in your hands can open it. In order to avoid getting the box lost—or rather, you will surely be distracted if I keep following on the side, I am considerate in this regard of course—I shall hand this box to Un Izoey. Once your key activates, just go find her."

"My question: Lab Chief, you said this was for entertainment as a spectator."

"But that doesn't mean I need to observe throughout the entire process in order to satisfy myself. The greatest unknown is still the final result. As for the process along the way, I just need to know roughly what happens. So that's that. Once you confirm that someone's key is activated, no need to resist, just let them open the box."

"Affirmative."

After tossing the box over to Un Izoey, Pakauki turned around lightly to walk away.

"Starting tomorrow, I will look forward to your spirited efforts. Since it's very late tonight already, it's about time to head back—Oh..."

Originally about to leave in leisure, his pace suddenly changed.

A conclusion was announced to the stagnant situation. A figure dashed rapidly towards Pakuaki.

"I understand your motives now. But I have received orders to obtain the Indulgence Disk and have no intention of being toyed with in the palm of your hand. Truth be told, I shall only adhere to mine own will! I have decided to take the box then catch you and make you open it!"

"Like I said already, even I can't open the box. Looks like someone isn't listening to others. Un Izoey, I will count on you as my bodyguard on my way back."

Pakuaki started running into the darkness. Un Izoey guarded his back while intercepting the pursuing Kotetsu to engage in battle. The sounds of impact between tiger claws and the foot-wielded knife gradually grew distant within the blink of an eye.

"Oh—Wait up! Our conversation isn't over yet...!"

Pakuaki's reply could be heard faintly from afar: "Don't worry, I'll make sure she gets back to the hotel before lights out—"

"That's not what I'm talking about! This guy is still utterly infuriating as always! Should we give chase too?"

"It would be a bit difficult now, given their head start so we might not be able to catch up to him. Besides, Ueno-san's physical condition doesn't seem to have recovered yet... Ueno-san?"

Head down in a daze, Kirika suddenly looked up.

"Huh—What? Uh... Sorry, I..."

"Konoha is right. Even if the arm is already reattached, there was a large amount of bleeding within a short time span. Feeling unwell is only normal. Class Rep, don't put on a brave face. Just get some proper rest."

After Haruaki finished, Kirika lowered her head with a slightly apologetic expression.

Pakuaki had escaped and there was no way to pursue now. Chasing after him, Kotetsu seemed to possess combat ability rivaling Un Izoey's, but as long as Un Izoey focused on defense and interception, their fight was not going to reach a decisive result so easily. The box carrying the Indulgence Disk was in Un Izoey's possession. Left at the scene were only the keys for opening the box.

A long sigh could be heard.

"In the end, there's nothing we can do for the rest of today. Starting tomorrow, there's only one thing we can do... Basically, at the current stage, we have no choice but to play that bastard's game obediently. Freaking incompetent."

Kururi scratched her head hard and whispered as though voicing thoughts on behalf of everyone present.

Part 3

In the darkness, Kotetsu was running as fast as possible. At the same time, she was engaged in an intense battle against the dark-skinned girl blocking her way.

The source of the driving force empowering her limbs was her loyalty towards the trusted master.

To Kotetsu, the master was an existence more than simply a master. In other words, it was the arm itself that swung the sword known as herself. Without that arm to hold and support Kotetsu, a sword had no meaning of

existence. A sword held by puppies and kittens was no different from scrap metal.

Arms for wielding swords could be classified into many types. There were the arms of young children, powered by hot-blooded fervor, hoping to avenge murdered parents; there were the arms of young warriors, wishing to achieve success and renown on the battlefield; there were the arms of elderly generals who firmly refused to let go of past glory; there were the arms of prostitutes about to commit suicide together with their lovers.

However, the arm of the master in possession of Kotetsu was none of the above.

The arm of one who possessed true strength.

The arm of a true warrior.

Hence, Kotetsu was filled with self-pride. She was the best master Kotetsu could hope for. To be discovered by someone like that and permitted to serve her, hanging at her waist as a weapon. As a sword, was there any joy more noble and greater than this? Was there any other meaning in existence Kotetsu ought to believe in?

Absolutely none.

Hence, Kotetsu remained resolute. Powered by unadulterated and sincere loyalty, she acted single-mindedly and selflessly to execute the master's orders. This was how Nagasone Kotetsu lived as a sword.

(Since master ordered me to obtain the Indulgence Disk... I must... definitely get my hands on it...!)

Such was the way she lived, such was the way she existed.

If one had to use an even simpler word to describe it, then one must use a particular word that was very familiar to Kotetsu in the past.

It was proof of unwavering loyalty, the flag of conviction.

Indeed, Nagasone Kotetsu—

...Lived precisely for «Integrity».

She lived in loyalty and integrity devoted towards the master she trusted.

"Isn't it time for you to give up? I suggest this suggestion!"

Hence, listening in the midst of combat as Un Izoey threw this suggestion at her, Kotetsu remained firmly resolute, simply shouting forcefully the words that represented her way of living.

"Truth be told—This is a foolish question!"^[10]

Part 4

...He was walking alone at night. Always extremely loyal to him, she loyally fulfilled her duties this time as well. Hence, he was able to chew his CalorieMate without worry and could also make a phone call without worry.

"Hi, although it's quite sudden, would you like to have a wager?"

'Fufu, it really is quite sudden, Lab Chief. But this forcefulness is quite beast-like, I don't dislike that at all. What are the terms?'

He explained through the cellphone. Laughing in her usual, distinctive manner, she said:

'I see now. Regarding the "unknown" that you are pursuing this time, Lab Chief, what is the goal?'

"Hey hey, don't talk as though I had planned this from the very beginning. It is merely coincidental. If Un Izoey hadn't forgotten to pack something and coincidentally, I happened to visit you, I wouldn't have come to Kyoto in the first place. I only volunteered myself to run the errand because I thought it'd be nice to drop by and see how they're doing after such a long period of separation. There was only one part where intent played a role—when Un Izoey reported to me that they ran off during nighttime. As a protector, following them was the only responsible thing to do. Of course, the fact that «Ganletti's Door» happened to be in my pocket was just a coincidence among coincidences."

'Lab Chief, this is probably like deliberate negligence? Despite not planning for this particular moment, you still carried it beforehand in case this kind of situation arises in the future. This is the same kind of deliberate as deliberately not cleaning up.'

"Fufu, I shall invoke my right to silence regarding this point."

'Besides, nothing was forcing you to use that thing. Since you chose to do so, Lab Chief, it meant that you needed that thing for the sake of the unknown you seek. At the very least, it's pretty much the same as the

requirement that my destined significant other must possess bristles. Kusususu?'

Pakuaki grinned next to the cellphone.

"I guess so. Watching them during the daytime, certain suspicions occurred to me."

'What suspicions?'

"Do I need to elaborate!? Despite the rare opportunity of being on a school excursion, they're behaving themselves too much! That's why I'm trying to give them a slight push from behind. I was thinking, including her, those girls simply haven't found an opportunity to seize. Once they're given a clear and simple pretext, developments should come about. Fufufu!"

'Kusususu... But Lab Chief, after listening to your explanation just now, the person possessing the unknown you're the most interested in ended up not getting a key, right?'

"This did exceed my calculations, yes, but the effects are not fatal... Because she will be watching up close the girls who stand as rivals in love, taking action after gaining a pretext. Hence, it doesn't matter after all."

'You sound very happy.' The voice sounded a little exasperated.

"Of course. Because an interesting situation has developed unexpectedly. You noticed too, right?"

'Kusususu, that goes without saying—in other words, Lab Chief, you are seeking more than one unknown, aren't you?'

"That matter truly piques my curiosity. How will things develop? What are they going to do? ...Oh my, I'm really looking forward to it all."

Pakuaki looked up at the night sky, pondering future plans. At this moment, the woman on the other end suddenly asked:

'I already understand the situation, so let's return to the subject at the start. What is my prize if I win this wager?'

"Hmm, let me hear your demands first. Is there anything you want?"

'Please give me a deputy branch chief who has more dense body hair, more pungent body odor, more developed muscles and more like a beast that howls towards the sky at length!'

A forceful and instant answer.

Hold on, what kind of dangerous conversation is this!? Aren't I the first and only deputy chief who matches the branch chief's expectations!? —This anxious voice could be heard coming from the other side of the receiver.

Part 5

On the second night of the school excursion, the girls were lying in bed in the same room, deep in thought.

Konoha was looking up at the dark ceiling, agonizing on her own.

There were a number of problems. Among them was Nagasone Kotetsu, one of her own kind.

Why was Kotetsu using those eyes—directed towards Konoha only—glaring at her as though bearing a grudge from a blood feud?

As far as Konoha could remember, she had neither met nor spoken to Kotetsu before. Although she had heard rumors of Kotetsu being a renowned sword, the fact that a fellow sword had gotten cursed like her and even gained human form, Konoha had no way of knowing all this.

No amount of pondering was going to yield answers. Hence, Konoha decided to forget this problem for now. The other remaining problem was clearly a very large problem indeed.

The key of emotion that circumstances compelled her to catch, what should be done with it? Besides, Indulgence Disks had nothing to do with her in the first place. Hence, there was no worthwhile reason for her to rack her brain, trying to open that box.

Nevertheless, he would want to obtain the Disk. If she did not take any action, he would struggle and try hard as though trying to compensate. The reason was the same as when the key was received. If she did not do it, he would surely have to work extra hard. Hence, that was why she had to step up to the task.

The next issue Konoha considered was how to activate the key. The key was useless unless it detected a certain amount of emotions. Then what was the strongest emotion in her heart, enough to activate the key the fastest?

(...That goes without saying.)

Konoha savored the feeling as though there was a tightening in her chest. Him, him, him.

Expressing these feelings honestly would be the fastest. Getting closer to him than usual, talking to him more than usual, being slightly more forthright than usual.

She has now obtained a reason to do so.

Hence, there was no helping it.

The box could not be opened unless she did this. Further dallying could very well allow the enemy to claim the prize first. Hence, it was imperative to make haste. There was no time to hesitate and deliberate.

But of course, Konoha knew these were only token words. She also felt hesitant in her heart about using these token words. She had wanted to take such actions in the first place, but now, someone else had simply added another reason to justify it.

Token words created forcibly by another's hand. The excuse provided to her by someone else's machinations.

Indeed, certain aspects greatly infuriated Konoha. But even so, right now—

The circumstances already did not allow her to leisurely avoid using those token words.

Another type of situation unrelated to the box or the Indulgence Disk.

In a certain sense, this was an even more important problem to her than the Indulgence Disk.

—This concerned her who had resolved herself already and started taking action.

Konoha could not afford to drag her feet any longer.

This thought was the final sticking point that compelled Konoha to decide on her actions for the next day.

Because it must be done—She used these token words to cover the surface.

As much as it displeased her to accept the token words given by someone else, Konoha regarded it as a necessary evil.

(Then I shall... go on the offensive slightly...)

Konoha closed her eyes and admitted.

What was going to take place tomorrow was a war, in a certain sense.

Kururi aside, Fear should ultimately reach the same conclusion as Konoha. Even if hers were feelings without self-awareness.

Trying to strengthen one's feelings on their own was very difficult. These feelings were produced only due to interacting with others, precisely arising from the interactions with the one who stirred up one's emotions the most.

However, because there was only one of him.

This naturally implied competition—Who could stay by his side and who could interact with him the most proactively.

Consequently, this meant war. A competitive war to steal him away as well as a war of conquest to occupy the position by his side.

Since she had already decided to attack, she was not going to hesitate. Since she had already decided to enter the fray, the only thing left to do was steel her determination.

In other words—She absolutely must not lose.

(However...)

Amidst an atmosphere of drowsiness, Konoha sighed lightly while thinking.

Without exception, each and every day was war.

Konoha resolved herself to not lose.

If one considered what was different from usual, this was actually no different from usual.

Fear was curled up in bed, her brow in a deep frown while she pondered.

(Releasing... emotions... honestly?)

So confusing.

To be honest, that was her only reaction.

Wasn't that what she always did?

She essentially acted according to her thoughts and feelings. Well, on occasion she did read the mood and held back a little or told minor lies, but still, that happened quite infrequently.

Already releasing her emotions very honestly to begin with, she now had to release them with even greater honesty? What the heck? Or did this mean that she still had other emotions that had not been released honestly, so these emotions now needed to be exposed?

(Argh, I don't understand, I really don't understand... But...)

If failing to understand then failing to activate the key to open the box—

Then she was not going to get the Indulgence Disk. That mysterious girl was going to snatch it away.

Fear absolutely could not tolerate that. She must obtain the Indulgence Disk. She desired it greatly. Even one more would be good and as soon as possible.

If one were to ask her why—Indeed, there were a number of reasons.

To oppose the new and violent power of Dual Emulation that she had discovered by chance; to suppress this darkness that she was forced to recognize as still filling her interior.

At the same time, her current self was able to admit. Her next wish was also the greatest reason why she wished to obtain the Indulgence Disks.

In other words, she wished to use them to suppress her curse and allow her body and mind to become cleaner.

She also wished she could openly confront those feelings she sensed that "might possibly exist" in her heart, those feelings that had arisen for the first time in her life. In order to confront those feelings directly, without the slightest trepidation, unease, worry or regret...

(O-Oh my...?)

Indeed... They did exist? Emotions that ought to be released honestly. Emotions she had not usually released. Given the current circumstances, emotions that could not be released. However, the final goal was clearly

that, hence for that purpose, it must be done, this felt totally contradictory and paradoxical—

(Urghhh... I'm even more confused!)

Fear struggled and rolled silently under the blanket.

At this moment, she suddenly thought of Konoha who was sleeping in the futon next to her, in possession of the same kind of key. She wondered if Konoha had already found what she needed to do.

For some unknown reason, the image of a certain boy's face surfaced in her mind at this time.

...As though related to what she ought to do and also related to what Konoha might possibly do.

Fear felt that these two matters were in opposition. Konoha's course of action was apparently going to pose a hindrance to her in various ways. It seemed like a competition to eliminate others was going to start.

At least, Fear felt that compared to herself, Konoha had already gathered a clearer idea of what she needed to do. Fear also felt that Konoha had already decided the direction for her course of action starting tomorrow.

(What... should I do...?)

Fear took out the key in her tracksuit's pocket. Curled under the blanket, she kept examining it intently.

It could not be seen clearly. However, Fear recalled seeing the base of the key turning slightly pink before she went to bed. She had not done anything to it, so this meant that the key had detected the emotions she naturally released starting from when she received the key till now.

Simply the thought of Konoha taking action tomorrow was making a vague and inexplicable sense of worry surface in her heart. If this type of feeling counted as well, roughly how much emotional volume did it have? Fear wondered vacantly.

Kirika was staring intently at her own palm on top of her blanket.

Accompanied by regret in her heart.

Nothing more than that.

Part 6

The next morning, it was the third day of the school excursion.

In a certain sense, this day was the main event of the trip, the day when each group of students was given a whole day of free time. Each group had to make their own arrangements and visit the shrines and temples of their choosing. Naturally, this was not purely for having fun since the students had to hand in reports after the school excursion.

That said, for Haruaki and company who were stuck in a difficult conundrum, as well as some of the students who intended to fully experience this once-in-a-lifetime school excursion, now was not the time to be law-abiding and dutifully following the basic rule of staying in their groups.

At the starting point on the third day, namely, the bus station in front of the hotel, the students dispersed to head towards their respective destinations. At this time, the members of three groups were exchanging glances, each harboring respective hidden agendas.

Girls of Group One: Fear, Konoha, Kirika and Kana. Fear and the girls did not want to get Kana involved.

Boys of Group Six: Haruaki, Taizou and Animori. Since anything could happen next, Haruaki wanted to go along with Fear and the girls without getting the two other boys involved. On the other hand, Murasawa, who was supposed to be in the group, was absent.

Girls of Group Five: Un Izoey, Shiraho, Hinata... Another girl who was supposed to be in their group was also absent.

In other words, the two students who had gone missing had formed a couple over the past few days, thus they intended to enjoy the whole day as a private date in Kyoto, readily deserting the frontlines early on. "I can't believe another traitor apart from Haruaki has appeared!" "So he wasn't planning a perfect crime at all!" Taizou and Animori seemed to have taken quite a blow.

Then—

"My will: I ask permission for my decision to stay with the Group One girls for today."

"Huh? All because of that lustful couple's fault, our group is already down to three people remaining. Now it's going to be just the two of us, Hinata and me?"

Hence, a chaotic grouping conference arose from Un Izoey and Shiraho's dispute—

In the end, they split themselves into two groups with Haruaki, Fear, Konoha, Kirika and Un Izoey in one group while Shiraho, Hinata, Kana, Taizou and Animori were in the other.

For some reason, Kana was snickering to herself and readily agreed to exchange with Un Izoey and join Shiraho's group (but actually, it was Fear, Konoha and Kirika who negotiated with her and Haruaki had no idea how they convinced her, perhaps by using cafeteria coupons as bribery). The biggest problem was Taizou, who kept yelling relentlessly after Haruaki's group dwindled down to two boys remaining: "I absolutely won't tolerate the appearance of a second traitor! I absolutely forbid Haruaki from heading towards paradise alone!" Kana sighed deeply and said:

"Oh come on, Taichi, read the mood a little, willya? Sigh... Hey Shirahocchi, can we take in these two poor losers?"

"To be frank, I have no wish to be trailed by two mongrels on the side... Nevertheless, they can help carry things at least. Weighing merits against drawbacks, I suppose their utility barely wins out if one were too too lazy to carry the burden of souvenirs while walking around in Kyoto. But apart from that, I shall regard them as mere air."

By agreeing to take them in, Shiraho's answer proved to be the decisive factor. "Air! In other words... Ah, I can walk together with Sakuramairi-san and even smell her, ignored by her... I-I'll come along, please let me join!" Apparently a hidden fan of Shiraho, Animori proceeded to convince Taizou.

"Hate! I hate harems!"

"Hold on, Taizou. Think carefully. If things continue to develop at this rate, we'll end up with just two guys' lonely Kyoto trip... But if you cast away your hatred slightly, we're still sort of having a kyah-kyah-ufufu rosy school excursion together with three girls... Decades later, when we're all old men, which kind of school excursion do you want to reminisce over...?"

"No good will come out of hatred. That's what I've always believed."

That was the kind of dialogue which took place.

Hence, new groups were formed. Haruaki's new group decided to follow the itinerary originally planned by Fear's group beforehand. Finally setting off was good and all, but—

Currently, Haruaki was feeling at quite a loss.

(U-Uhhhhhh...?)

The group was just about to head towards Tou-ji, the "Eastern Temple"—also known as Kyouougokoku-ji.

In his mouth, he was eating a soft, chewy food. Although it was slightly unsightly to eat while walking, their group had bought some mochi rice cakes from a nearby shop that was fairly well-known. But honestly, Haruaki was unable to focus his attention on the sweet confectionery that was supposed to be quite delicious.

Because all this time, a soft sensation was pressed against his elbow.

"Uh... Say... Konoha..."

"What's the matter? By the way, this mochi is really delicious, it's very soft and elastic!"

Something even softer and more elastic than mochi struck Haruaki's elbow again. Konoha was walking by Haruaki's side. The distance between them was clearly much closer than usual. Was it because the path was too narrow? No, even if that were true, Haruaki still felt it was too close. Hence, the slightest carelessness always resulted in his arm touching her. However, Konoha did not seem to mind and was smiling more cheerfully and radiantly towards him than usual.

Totally at a loss, Haruaki glanced backwards and discovered that Fear and Kirika were simply staring at him with half-narrowed eyes. It would be safe to say that they were not exactly in a good mood, hence Haruaki turned to face forward without saying a word. As a side note, walking at the back, Un Izoey simply displayed a face of sleepiness while tilting her head in puzzlement. Naturally, she was also stuffing round rice cakes into her mouth.

As though trying to escape reality, Haruaki called up his recollections of the "box" being kept in Un Izoey's backpack. Just as Pakuaki had said, it could not be opened even if they used Fear's torture tools or Konoha's knife

hand strikes. This was the conclusion reached last night after Fear forcibly challenged Un Izoey with fighting words before going to bed: "Since you believe that guy's claims, it wouldn't hurt to try, right?"

As a side note, according to Un Izoey, after confirming Pakuaki had escaped successfully, she had shaken Kotetsu off her trail, fleeing the scene without particular intent to defeat or injure Kotetsu.

There were many issues to think about.

In order to open the box containing the Indulgence Disk, what should they do? The keys of emotion. What did Fear and the other girls intend to do? What could he do to assist them? Was Kotetsu going to reappear? Why did she want the Indulgence Disk? Furthermore—

"Oh! Haruaki-kun, we've arrived! This is the Tou-ji's Great South Gate... It's truly massive, how majestic in splendor. Oh Haruaki-kun, given this rare chance, let's take a commemorative photo together! Say cheese—!"

"Ch-Cheese...?"



Haruaki's thoughts were once again dispersed in an instant by that highly elastic sensation. Konoha was standing beside him, pressed tightly against him. Since she had extended one arm to hold her digital camera, intending to take a photo of them both, the two of them were intimately pressed together, arm in arm. A gentle and elegant fragrance was drifting from her braids. Any closer and perhaps their cheeks might end up pressed together.

"Uh... W-We could ask someone else to take the photo for us..."

"Rejected, rejected. There's no need to ask someone else specifically to photograph us, because this is just a little keepsake, you're overthinking things. Come, smile a big one~ ...Seriously, isn't it pointless to ask someone to help photograph us when this is a rare chance to squeeze together legitimately...?"

Konoha murmured softly, so quiet that her voice was covered up by the faint sound of the digital camera's shutter.

"D-Damn Cow Tits... Your shamelessness is a sight I cannot endure any further!"

"I don't quite understand but can't you just get your photo taken as well? I suggest this kind of suggestion."

"Muu... W-What a great suggestion. This has absolutely nothing to do with that whatever honest emotions, it's just a memento for this trip, that's right, I consider it material to text back to Kuroe. Like those evidence photos, this is for telling her that the shameless brat is basically living well. In other words—Hey Haruaki, I'm up next for the same kind of photo, got that!?"

"Uh—Yachi, may I have a photo with you too? Just a memento. Indeed, Fear-kun makes a good point, this is just a memento."

"I suddenly realize a realization. This is an unknown for me too. My wish: I should take this opportunity to experiment with this unknown experience of the self-photo..."

"Hey, hold on a sec, why can't we all just stand together in a row to take a keepsake photo normally?"

For some reason, Haruaki's screams were ignored. After each girl had their turn to take a photo with him, they finally had an group photo as though out of obligation. Speaking of school excursion photos, normally

they should be group photos, right...? Why was everyone prioritizing boring selfies? Haruaki was utterly baffled.

Next, the group passed through the Great Southern Gate to enter Tou-ji. Konoha's reaction turned out to be quite different from usual.

"Haruaki-kun, it's a five-story pagoda! A pagoda! It's so tall!"

"Yeah, that's right. It's supposed to be the tallest ancient pagoda in Japan. Wanna have a look at the guide booklet?"

What Haruaki meant was actually "I'll lend you mine" but Konoha brought her face up close to look down towards the booklet in Haruaki's hands. As though supporting herself, she lightly gripped Haruaki's arm that was holding the booklet. Roughly half the weight of a certain heavy object was transferred over to Haruaki's arm. He felt his heart skip another beat.

"Ehehe, thank you. Hmm... The height is roughly 55m... The pagoda burned down a number of times due to being struck by lightning. The current pagoda is the fifth time it was rebuilt, commissioned by—"

Konoha paused for an instant. After seeing the words written there, Haruaki shuddered in terror.

"Tokugawa... Iemitsu... The Third Shogun..."

Konoha whispered softly and suddenly straightened up. Smiling, she pointed at the pagoda while using her hand to make a chopping motion with a flick of her wrist, she said:

"Uh—May I go over there briefly?"

"Hold on hold on! What are you intending to do to a symbol of World Heritage!?"

Haruaki frantically grabbed Konoha's shoulder as she walked forward. Giggling, she halted in her steps.

"Haha, just kidding. Even if it's me, I won't harbor a notion such as 'how exhilarating it would be to treat the Tokugawa-built pagoda as lego, taking it apart block by block like a toy'."

"I totally can't tell if you're joking or being serious..."

"Like I said, I'm just kidding! Let's get going then visit other places!"

The group continued to walk within the temple's confines. However, an area starting from the Great Southern Gate was fenced off, making it impossible to reach the pagoda's base. It was not just the pagoda. In order to enter the fenced off area which included the temple's lecture hall and main hall, they would need to make their way to the entrance on the north side and buy tickets.

"Apparently, there are many Buddha statues in the lecture hall and main hall. I'd like to have a look, Haruaki-kun, can we?"

"That's fine with me. Plus I like looking at Buddha statues too."

Essentially scowling the whole time, Fear broke her silence at this moment:

"I don't quite like them. Besides, it's gonna cost money to go inside."

"In that case, you may stay here and wait for us. After all, seeing as I am the one inviting him, I shall pay for Haruaki-kun's share."

"Eh? No, I'd feel really bad about that—"

"Don't worry, it is fine. Come, let us go."

"Gununu... I-I'm going after all! This is also material I can text back to Kuroe and Sovereignty. In a certain way, Buddha statues can be considered their fellow kindred, they might actually be interested!"

"I-I was interested to begin with, so I shall come along very ordinarily. Nothing more than that. There isn't the slightest reason of the absolutely ridiculous kind."

"The Lab Chief has already given me provisional research funds. Also, no matter which tribe they come from, excellent statues all contain excellent souls. I am very interested with great interest."

In the end, the whole group filed into the lecture hall. Greeting Haruaki and the girls was a group of fierce and intimidating Buddha statues. According to the explanation in the guide booklet, these twenty-one Buddha statues were known as a three-dimensional mandala. Among them, five of the Buddha statues were especially grand and majestic. With Acala in the center, they were the Five Great Wisdom Kings. Their fierce and intimidating faces exuded a merciless aura of zero tolerance towards evildoers.

"H-How awe-inspiring..."

"Truly powerful. If this kind of thing started moving in the middle of the night, I'll definitely flee in utter terror."

"Even when there's clearly a Japanese doll at home already, running around all day long?"

Naturally occupying the position by Haruaki's side, Konoha chuckled. Haruaki glanced at the side of her face and finally asked a question that had been bothering him.

"You... seem quite happy?"

"I'm not allowed to be happy?"

"No, of course you're allowed. I just wanted to confirm the situation... Basically, to help Fear gather Indulgence Disks, Konoha, you intend to assist in opening that box, right? So I was wondering, how do you intend to use the 'key' that guy gave us and how are you going to increase the emotional volume..."

"That is precisely the reason."

Konoha relaxed her cheeks, placed her hands together behind her back and lifted her upper body slightly. Her braids swayed in a lively manner.

"Most reluctantly, I have decided to assist Fear-san. Then since the box must be opened, for this purpose, a large volume of emotions need to be released, apparently... Hence, I have decided to open my heart and have as much fun as possible today! To be slightly more honest than usual, to be slightly less reserved than usual. That is the situation."

"I-I see..."

An unexpectedly simple answer.

"Perhaps you may find this troublesome, Haruaki-kun, but please bear with me. However, if I go too far, please go ahead and give me a severe scolding! Oh right... It's really been a very long time since you last scolded me, Haruaki-kun... Ehehe..."

Somehow, Haruaki felt like he heard incomprehensible whispers at the very end, but decided to ignore it. The blissful expression on her face, standing on the opposite spectrum in stark contrast to the statues of the Wisdom Kings before his eyes, was also baffling.

In any case, Haruaki now knew the direction that Konoha had decided for her course of action henceforth.

Then what should he do as well?

What should he do to help them?

Staring at the Acala statue's solemn face, Haruaki zoned out into deep thought.

Part 7

Naturally, Haruaki and company were not the only ones involved.

Speaking of Kyoto's shrines, one of the popular attractions tourists always made sure to visit was Kiyomizu-dera. At Kiyomizu-dera's main entrance, the Deva Gate painted brightly in vermilion, those two were standing there waiting. After telling them last night of today's itinerary, they had agreed to meet up here.

"Yes, you have arrived. What have you been doing so far?"

"Tsk... What a nag. Being a member of the workforce sure is tough. How could two employees go absent without prior notice... Sneaking out half-way like this is already a miracle. Freaking incompetent. I don't even know what I want. Stirring up emotions my foot, what the heck am I supposed to do..."

While Kururi was muttering and grumbling nonstop, Bivorio responded with a smile.

"I believe that having contact with others is the best method for stirring up emotions. You must have realized that too, which is why you decided to come here first and bring me along as well, isn't that right? Oh, speaking of which, Kouichirou is apparently going to do our work for us today. If the same situation arises tomorrow, rather than having me around, you should take Kouichirou out with you to serve as a thank you gift. Tomorrow happens to be his birthday, so that will surely stir up your feelings more potently than being with me—"

"W-Woooooooooah! W-What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with that guy at all, freaking incompetent! Hey, okay, let's go, standing at the main entrance and chatting isn't going to get anything done!"

Kururi rapidly raced ahead. Hence, Haruaki's group also followed her through the main gate. Bivorio slowed her pace down to accommodate them. Glancing at Un Izoey who was trailing at the back, she asked:

"Excuse me—"

"I was thinking you might feel concerned, but don't worry. She won't do anything out of line for no reason... For the most part, she usually stays quiet in the classroom too."

While speaking, Haruaki also observed her a little. Whether in the past or the present, Bivorio had only witnessed Un Izoey acting as a member of the Lab Chief's Nation. One could hardly blame her for feeling concerned.

"I declare: giving explanation that I am accompanying you as the one in possession of the box. I hope all of you can treat me as air." Just as she said when they first set off, Un Izoey simply walked while her eyes displayed no emotional fluctuation as usual. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of foreign tourists here, given the striking presence exuded by the dark-skinned and navel-baring girl, it was quite difficult to treat her as air.

Whether or not Bivorio accepted Haruaki's explanation, she looked like she had decided not to feel bothered about Un Izoey.

"So—how is the progress so far?"

"According to what they've shown me just now, Konoha has accumulated a fair amount of emotional volume. Although I don't really get how it works, it's roughly thirty-something percent. However, Fear's is only twenty percent. How about you?"

"Kururi is also at approximately twenty percent."

"In other words, that's the normal speed of accumulation under ordinary conditions? Anyway, I've asked Konoha just now and she said her method was to be less reserved than usual and have as much fun as possible."

"That's all?"

Bivorio kept blinking as though trying to confirm something.

"I guess... that's all there is to it."

"Fufu. Is that so? I understand."

She smiled as if she had figured out something on her own. Haruaki remained puzzled but did not dwell on the issue. He continued:

"Konoha probably intends to continue that here as well... So the two of you—or rather, Kururi—should come with us and do the same. Judging from Kururi's tone of voice just now, it's rare for you two to take time off and have fun, right? Though it's like accompanying us to go sightseeing today... Oh, but since you live here, Kiyomizu-dera probably isn't much of an attraction for local residents like you, right?"

"We came here once but haven't visited again. So it has been quite a long time, you have no need to worry too much."

"Really? That's good to hear."

Bivorio shifted her gaze away indifferently and murmured emphatically: "That aside, the problem is... I suppose I should have brought Kouichirou along...? Seriously, if only he could act a little more forthright too..."

The expression on her face resembled that of a mother worrying over a stubborn child.

After paying the entry fare, Haruaki and company entered the main hall—namely, the famous Kiyomizu Stage. There were many people for the most part. The place was packed with lively crowds, not just on the stage itself but also over on the side where two specimens of «Benkei's Khakkhara», one long and one short, which people could reputedly obtain good fortune simply by lifting them.

Haruaki and company weaved through the crowds and advanced on their way, holding onto the railing on the stage's edge. The scenery was extremely beautiful.^[11]

"Imagine what it'd feel like to jump down from Kiyomizu Stage... Hmm, if you had the courage to jump down from here, you probably possess the determination to get almost anything done."

"But Class Rep, according to this guide booklet, people have actually jumped down. However, the survival rate is 85%."

"That's unexpectedly high. After knowing that, the required determination suddenly seems much less impressive."

Finding Fear rather quiet, Haruaki glanced towards the side, only to see her spacing out while staring at the beautiful scenery below. Haruaki was

expecting her to imitate Konoha and yell noisily: "I will face my feelings honestly and have fun without restraint! Run around without restraint! Give me rice crackers now!" But instead, Fear was even more quiet and well-behaved than usual. What was going on?

As a side note, Haruaki also noticed that Kirika was actually behaving differently from usual, despite conversing with him normally just now. He kept feeling that she was more nervous than on the first day of the trip, or rather, her mood seemed a little depressed as a result of something bothering her. Since she did not have a key in her possession, that should not be the direct reason. However, Haruaki concluded that her condition was still related to her brother who had handed out the keys.

In contrast to the depressed two, Konoha's spirits were quite excited. "I have something to say!" She announced clearly and raised her hand straight up.

"It's true that this scenery is very beautiful and attractive! However, I'd like to have a look at the local deity's shrine north of this main hall! Having paid the entry fare already, we should visit every place that is open to us!"

"Ah, yeah, of course that's fine... But is there anything there that's making you so emotional?"

"Of course!"

Konoha answered immediately, prompting Fear to go "hmpf."

"A place where someone like Cow Tits wants to go... and the main point being a weird place like a Shinto shrine inside a Buddhist temple's precinct. That means it must be the stronghold of an evil cult where weird rituals with fully nude festivals are held! Haruaki, lend me your guide booklet! I have to confirm, lemme look lemme look..."

Fear proceeded to moan and stand still. Peering at the same page from the side, Kirika suddenly said with a grave expression: "Th-This is...!"

Presumably realizing what place they were reacting towards, Kururi sighed with impatience. On the other hand, Bivorio whispered softly with a gentle smile: "Girls will be girls after all."

A large crowd had gathered there already, a spot that apparently anyone slightly informed would know about. There were Taishyuu High students from other groups; high school students in unfamiliar uniforms, probably in

the middle of their own school excursion; completely unrelated adults and foreign tourists—Since everyone was lining up in an orderly manner, there was no choice but to endure the long wait. However, it was worth the wait.

This was it—The love divination rocks.

(Although it's just absolutely ridiculous superstition...)

Kirika muttered in her thoughts and looked again at the two rocks placed in front of the worship hall. Carefully encircled with shimenawa rope, there was even a sign erected which read "The Love Divination Rocks." It was said that love would bear fruit if one were to successfully walk from one rock to the other while keeping their eyes closed.

Fear and Konoha were leaning forward not far away ahead, watching other people attempt the love divination challenge. Presumably thinking to himself: "Yeah, after all, girls all enjoy stuff like love divination," Haruaki was standing slightly further away, leisurely waiting for the girls. His obliviousness was both gratifying and infuriating.

Sighing lightly, Kirika noticed Kururi standing by her side. Taking out the key from her pocket, Kururi scowled at the key that had only turned roughly 20-30% red.

"Sheesh... Freaking incompetent. Had I known..."

"Then you wouldn't have picked it up?"

Kirika had not spoken to her directly until now—their relationship was nowhere near good enough to have a chat—but without realizing, she had already struck up conversation with Kururi. Kururi glanced sideways at Kirika.

"...No, I still would have. Like I said back then, this all started with my side so we can't owe you guys a favor. At least, shoving everything onto you guys would be unreasonable."

I never thought she'd be so honest—Kirika thought. Was her personality like that to begin with? Or was something different in her heart compared to before?

"So consider it killing time, lemme try asking... What do you think I should do?"

"What a vague question, but I understand what you're trying to say."

Kirika smiled wryly. Also treating this as killing time, she tried to ponder seriously what suggestions she could offer.

"I think what Bivorio said earlier should be about right. The most effective way to stir up emotions is to interact with others. Even more effective if it's with someone special. In other words—He's called Kouichirou, right? You really should have brought the boyfriend who works with you at the restaurant—"

"S-S-S-S-Shut up! Freaking incompetent! What are you talking about!? That totally isn't the case with that guy! I have no idea exactly what's going on exactly, but that's that! Don't get the wrong idea!"

"Is that so? I was just trying to think of the most effective solution. If I misunderstood, then I'm truly sorry."

Kirika spoke calmly. When watching others acting flustered in front of her, she found herself feeling very calm instead. Furthermore, it was true that certain people were fatally clumsy and awkward at hiding their inner feelings. Kirika reminded herself to be more cautious as well.

"Sheesh, what's with you people...? Did everyone plan together to make fun of me?"

"That's not our intention."

"On the other hand, what's up with you lot?"

"What do you mean, what's up with us?"

Presumably intending to counterattack, Kururi scoffed.

"Let's not kid ourselves. I do have a woman's intuition after all. Of course I mean that carefree-looking guy."

"..."

Kirika wanted to remain silent, but that evidently failed to work.

"Although I've been on one before, you guys are currently on a school excursion, right? At the very least, I know that it's an excellent opportunity in that certain area. Hmph... How enviable. Because I've never experienced that kind of school life."

"—Do you really find it enviable?"

These words slipped out naturally. At the same time, they did not carry any emotion.

Kirika turned her gaze away from the rocks in front of the worship hall where a hurricane of love was blowing, then looked up towards the sky that was faintly decorated by a scant few drifting clouds.

There was no displeasure in her heart, which was as clear as the sky above. At the same time, something as vague and intangible as clouds was drifting from side to side within her, searching for a place to settle.

Those words, spoken vacantly, surely were her—

Their reality.

"We... Things are actually quite tough for us."

Kirika found Kururi examining the side of her face intently. Suddenly feeling embarrassed about staring up into the sky and saying such things, Kirika had no choice but to smile slightly in a wry manner and endure Kururi's gaze. Then she added:

"—But perhaps these are just absolutely ridiculous worries. In the end, it's the same for everyone. Other people's worries seem absolutely ridiculous to us while our own worries seem absolutely ridiculous to others. Consequently... There's no need to envy others too much."

Perhaps seeing something in Kirika's expression, Kururi exhaled. Then the corners of her lips curled in a grin.

"...Maybe. A-Ahhh, freaking incompetent."



For some reason, very unbelievably, Kirika felt the distance separating her and Kururi had shrunk ever so slightly. She also felt an unbelievable sense of complicit awareness.

Hence, Kirika asked in return:

"So consider it killing time, lemme try asking... What do you think I should do?"

"What a vague question, but I understand what you're trying to say."

Kururi smiled slightly wryly, then entered deep thought for the next few seconds with a serious look on her face.

"I guess there's no other way." Kururi whispered then looked towards Kirika solemnly and said:

"Just knock him over."

"Sometimes I do wonder very seriously, how much easier things would be if I really could do that."

Part 8

Narrowing his eyes, Haruaki stared at the scene.

"Inhale... Exhale..."

God, please split heaven and earth apart for miracles to manifest—Concentrating hard as though saying these words, Konoha breathed deeply. Keeping her eyes closed and leaning forward, she pressed her hands on the rock in front of her. Squeezed between her arms, a certain bulging presence quivered as though being restrained. "Okay!" Nodding to serve as a start signal, Konoha lifted her hands from the rock, then keeping her eyes closed, she spun around once to have her back facing the rock—

"N-No good, Cow Tits! Go right a bit! No, left! There's a cat by your foot! Watch out!"

"Ahhh, jeez, stop it with all the noise! ...Reaching the other side with guidance would mean that love cannot succeed without assistance from others... So conversely, so long as I can surmount these adverse conditions, it would imply that my love can bear fruit without being led astray by interlopers...!"

Step by step, Konoha was making definite progress towards the other rock that stood as part of a pair. Meanwhile, Fear was yelling from the side to help out. Kururi and Kirika, a rare combination, were chatting together while watching this scene unfold.

They all looked like they were quite enjoying themselves currently. So they really intended to activate their keys as quickly as possible by having the most fun?

(Hmm... As much as I'd like to help out, what could I do?)

While Haruaki was pondering this question, he suddenly sensed someone standing beside him. Turning his head to have a look, he found Bivorio. With a gentle expression, she looked at Kururi and said:

"Fufu, she hasn't been this happy for a long time now. Even ignoring the matter of the keys, coming to this place is definitely wonderful. I hope it'll help energize her from the fatigue of daily work."

Hearing her speak softly, Haruaki decided that this presented a good opportunity to chat about Kururi's current life.

"Work huh... To be honest, I was quite surprised to see her working earnestly. That's because it's not the kind of impression she gives off. Does she work seriously every day?"

"Yes. However, there were many situations when she first started working... Failure, anxiety, absence from work, or running home in the middle of the day, for example."

"I'm sorry to say this but that does fit my mental image of her a lot better."

"Fufu, I shall pretend I didn't hear that. Even so, she is trying to understand things in her own way, working hard to get used to the situation. For the sake of creating 'a place to belong to.' However, more time is still needed."

"A place to belong to..."

"Yes. Because we... have never had such a place. We only had a temporary and fake home. Long before the Family was established as an organization, this was already the case. I came from a human trafficking organization that disguised itself as a orphanage while Kururi had lost her parents and lived under a relative's long-term abuse. What we had at the time were not places where we belonged but only cold reality."

"..."

Bivorio sighed slightly at this time and said lightly: "Sorry." Then she shook her head as though trying to drive away those dark memories.

She proceeded to look at Kururi again.

"Whenever I recall these things, I would think that she must be a very resilient girl. No matter how many times she failed, no matter how unused to the work she was, she always persevered and never gave up easily. Even when she ran away, she would always return, meanwhile grumbling while she worked, putting her full effort into creating a place for herself to belong to. Indeed, she has worked very hard to become who she is now. I am very proud of her."

"The situation for you is the same, right? You're amazing too."

Haruaki could not help but let slip this remark. Bivorio widened her eyes for an instant then smiled demurely:

"As the saying goes, the older the wiser, after all, so things are easier for me than for that child. Furthermore, the people in this country are so friendly. Simply because I'm a foreigner, they turn a blind eye even when I make mistakes."

"Hmm, I guess that is really a bit unfair."

"However, she does have a reliable companion. Someone the same age whom she can engage in arguments together. Grumbling then forcing him to help her out sometimes, grumbling then helping him out in return sometimes, of course grumbling nonstop the whole time... Fufu. Interacting with him is simply for the sake of relieving stress, making contact with him is for the sake of getting used to the workplace environment, accepting his instruction is also for improving her skills at work."

"Uh... Are you referring to Kouichirou-san?"

"In consideration of privacy, I shall not make any comments regarding names."

Bivorio answered humorously and closed one eye lightly. Then she spoke as though murmuring to herself:

"Perhaps she managed to work so hard all this time only because he's around. No amount of thanks for him would be enough... I suppose she

probably feels gratitude from the bottom of her heart. Seriously, if only she could express such emotions a little more honestly, things could be settled very quickly..."

Bivorio's gaze remained on Kururi. Haruaki looked at Kururi again. Unlike in the past, Kururi was currently bearing a calm and peaceful expression. How much hard work had she put in before such an expression became possible for her? Haruaki could only imagine. Nevertheless, he found the current Kururi standing there a very dazzling sight to behold.

The conversation reached an end here. A peaceful silence.

I must work hard too—Haruaki thought. He must do what he ought to do.

Right now, what he ought to do was help Fear and the girls.

Then how should he go about it?

Emotions, Helping them strengthen their emotions. Speaking of emotions, the typical ones were joy, anger, pathos, and humor. The middle two were definitely ruled out. So that left joy and humor remaining? In other words, all he needed to do was make everyone happy and joyful—Right? But how?

"If we were at home right now, I could cook..."

For example, putting in more effort than usual to cook up a sumptuous feast or putting in abundant amounts of everyone's favorite foods. There were many other ways too.

However, saying this now did not help matters. While Haruaki was sighing, presumably having overheard his mutterings to himself—

"As much as you'd like to help them, you are worrying endlessly because you have no idea how—That seems to be what you are thinking at the moment."

"Woah! Uh yeah, that's true... You hit it right on the nail."

Bivorio smiled mischievously:

"My side has always been watching over existences like those girls. Watching over them tirelessly, my companions and I regarded them as our pride as well as our own standpoint and meaning of existence. In other words, we can be the considered the first to watch over them intently.

Naturally, it is but an easy task for me to guess what a boy is currently thinking when watching them with a worried expression."

Since Bivorio was able to smile in this manner while recalling her former way of life, it meant that she had truly turned over a new leaf—Haruaki thought.

"You wish to help them?"

"Of course."

"I don't think you need to force yourself to do anything. Just by being yourself, you will most likely help them already."

"Uh, I totally don't get what you're saying."

"Fufu, that's why I said it that way."

"You're still leaving me confused..."

Can't you give me a suggestion that's easier to understand? —While Haruaki smiled wryly on his own, Bivorio suddenly bent forward to examine his face. For some reason, her expression was many times more serious than before.

"Please allow me to take this opportunity to say a few more words. Having seen with twisted eyes, thought with a foolish mind and spoken with wrong words in the past, I have come to understand certain things. Precisely due to having gone through the filter of madness and ignorance, a certain something was left behind in my heart."

"...?"

"This is a request from me, the one who used to advocate the love of curses. It is also a wish akin to brazen, shameless contrition."

Bivorio blinked very slowly.

Then in a voice as light as a whisper:

"Please do not forget—Like ordinary people, they can be loved."

"Eh...?"

What she had said was both logical yet too logical, a fact that easily stood to reason.

What she had said was something extremely important that he had never thought about before.

Haruaki savored this type of contradictory feeling.

There was an inexplicably bitter feeling in the depths of his heart. Itching, scorching. His blood flow was about to start racing. Where to?

Seeing Haruaki's expression, Bivorio suddenly relaxed her tense expression, as though she had accomplished her mission by reaching this result.

Standing up straight, she cast a gentle gaze over Fear and the girls again.

Konoha was currently giggling "fufufu" while making fists repeatedly in a terrifying manner to put up a victory pose. Fear was grumbling: "Oh well... This also counts as a chance to confirm my spatial intelligence, nothing more, yes!" Then she placed her hands on the rock. "No one else is next, right? Okay... In that case, just as a memento, I'll have a go too..." Acting nonchalantly, Kirika took up her position behind Fear. On the other hand, Kururi shrugged.

"Oh dear, she looks so lonely, being the only one remaining at the original spot. Then I shall go tease her a little—rather, give her some advice on how to stir up her feelings. In any case, I need to give her a push first, tell her not to hold back and start by participating in the love divination."

"Oh sure."

Bivorio started walking towards Kururi but paused halfway and looked back at Haruaki.

"I forgot to say the most important thing. To supplement what I just said... This is purely what my intuition tells me as a person who advocates love."

Chuckling, she said:

"There is not the slightest inauthenticity in their personalities. Consequently, having obtained lives identical to humans, they will obtain love identical to humans as well. Then surely, they must be capable of having babies, right?"

"Wha...!?"

Bivorio shrugged lightly, turned to face forward again and continued on her way.

Haruaki had no idea if she was simply teasing him or not.

Part 9

As they departed from Kiyomizu-dera, Fear checked the state of her key again.

Seeing the key she fished out of her pocket, she sighed. Roughly... 40%? Not much progress had been made. Kururi's was pretty much the same but maintaining the previous lead, Konoha's key had already turned roughly 60% red.

"There wasn't much of a real sense prior to this point, but after exceeding the halfway mark... It turns out I can feel it slowly accumulating."

Fear glanced at Konoha's key and pouted slightly. That's just you, hurry and tell me the trick—Fear had no idea what to do and was not making enough progress. What did it mean to release emotions honestly? And how did it happen? Specifically, what needed to be done...

Despite feeling infuriated...

Upon thinking simply, she could actually emulate Konoha.

Fear had noticed how Konoha's behavior was slightly different from usual. She had also discovered hints among them on how to strengthen emotions.

Konoha essentially kept hanging by Haruaki's side. Clearly more frequently than usual, at an obviously closer distance than usual, right next to him. At a position that almost looked like they were touching. Those shameless things wobbling as though being shown off, even touching him for real on occasion. Frequently talking to him, frequently smiling at him.

(If I can do that as well... It'll work?)

Pushing Konoha aside, taking her place and doing the same thing, imitating her. Perhaps this would work.

But Fear was unable to do it.

Her pride prevented her. Other considerations occupied her mind. The differences between her and Konoha. The difference in past experience. The difference in time spent together over the years. The difference in bust size.

In other words, Fear was not Konoha. Hence, Fear did not want to act the same way.

"Why are you sulking, Fear? Next up is a place you really wanted to visit. Go and enjoy yourself."

She was having fun. Enjoying this period of time known as the school excursion, visiting place she had never been to, Fear believed this was her only way to intensify her emotions, hence she was having fun—That was Fear's original plan, but for some reason, the key was not gaining power. This was making her impatient.

The whole group took a bus back to the Kyoto station. Then taking a train, they traveled for roughly five minutes.

Their destination was a tourist attraction that could be reached quickly on foot. So, why would I really want to visit this place...? Fear could not remember. Anyway, let's continue moving forward, I'll probably remember eventually. But what should I do to infuse power into the key?

Just at this moment, someone pulled her collar. Fear turned to see Haruaki grabbing her by the uniform, an astonished look on his face while he pointed to the side using his other hand.

"Oh wow, you're really not acting yourself. What's wrong? This should be the main event for you, right? Uh, of course, it's more normal to get it on the way back, but it's way too weird for you to ignore it completely despite walking past head on."

"...Oh, I remember now!"

"You forgot? How could you forget this, that's truly astounding. Do you have a fever?"

"S-Shut up, I was just thinking about something."

"Okay... It's not like I can't understand, but it's not good to think too much. Relaxing appropriately is very important too. Besides, skipping over this place would be too unlike you. That'll make me feel uncomfortable all over. Let's go have a look first."

Unlike myself. I guess so. Fear agreed too.

"C-Cough." Fear cleared her throat and decided to temporarily forget the restlessness deep in her heart, a feeling of unfulfilled frustration. Haruaki was right. Rest was very important too.

Before her eyes was a shop that she was determined "only this place must be visited for sure" back when they were planning the itinerary for their group. As soon as she recalled this, there was no reason for her to stop walking. Opening her purse, Fear ran straight for the salesperson.

"Here you go, fox rice crackers, thank you for your patience~"

"Wow... They really are fox-shaped...!"

Fear's attention was grabbed by what the salesperson presented.

What a rare type of rice cracker, to think they would use visual impact to please customers from the start. Embodying entertainment and artistic value, the exquisite design made one reluctant to bite and eat the rice cracker. In addition to visual appeal, it even stimulated the sense of smell. The freshly baked rice crackers were giving off a very seductive aroma.

Fear's originally demoralized spirits were instantly revived somewhat. Rice crackers were still the best. Then what she needed to do next was—

"Fear, you're not going to eat it?"

"O-Of course I'll eat it. But it really feels such a shame to eat! A-Anyway, thanks for the food..."

Crunch. A crisp and refreshing texture. "Woohoo—" Fear could not help but exhale slowly.

"This aroma is too amazing! This... Hmm, there must be miso and sesame added! Two powerful forces, melded together perfectly. An elegant sweetness that seems to melt inside the mouth, yet definitely leaving behind a concrete sense of crunchiness... T-Too awesome! I'm so happy!"

As fast as she could, Fear ravenously wolfed down the rice crackers that were made in the image of fox masks. Watching her, Haruaki smiled.

"Haha... How should I put this? I knew it, you act the most honest when you're eating rice crackers. That kind of worried face really doesn't suit you."

"Muugu."

For some reason, Fear found herself attracted to his expression. She stopped chewing and ruminated over the word Haruaki had just said—honest.

Perhaps so. She could confidently say that she was currently acting true to her instincts. She could confidently say that she was acting true to her feelings. Then extrapolating from this, what else was there she could do?

For example, what did she currently want to do?

Fear pondered this question again.

She tried to be as objective as possible without missing any thoughts inside her heart.

Among them, she discovered thoughts that occupied the most volume. Accompanying them were all sorts of notions. Feelings dissuading her since Konoha and Kirika were present; feelings saying that doing it was fine; feelings of doubt, asking "why?"; feelings answering "no particular significance."

Ah, if only she could ignore these feelings and simply pick out her greatest desire at the root, perhaps that would be—

With crunch, Fear snapped the rice cracker held on her lips.

Taking that half of a fox mask, the half-eaten fox rice cracker—

She shoved it against Haruaki's mouth.

"—Here you go. Eat it. It's very yummy."

"Eh? Th-Thanks."

Fear chewed the rice cracker in her mouth to pieces then stared intently at Haruaki. Haruaki opened his mouth as though surrendering so she shoved again and he started chewing. His mouth seemed unexpectedly large, was this the same for all boys? —Fear secretly wondered. "Oh, it's very tasty." Haruaki praised quietly from the bottom of his heart. Munch munch munch. Staring at Haruaki's face intently, Fear started chewing at the same time.

"Mmm... Mmm, very tasty... Isn't it? I know right."

She wanted... to eat together with Haruaki.

...Although she had no idea why except that she wanted to do this.

Splitting a rice cracker into halves then feeding him directly. Looking into each other's eyes while crunchy sounds of chewing happened at the same time. Expressing sincere comments like "so tasty" to each other.

After trying it out for real, Fear felt an unbelievable tightening in her chest, turning into a scorching and unpleasant feeling yet making her want to dance and wave her arms. A smile naturally bloomed on her face and could not be stopped.

The flavor in her mouth gradually disappeared. What a shame. Let's eat a second one—Just as Fear thought that, a certain notion flashed across her mind.

Oh right, if simply eating halves of the same rice cracker together felt like this—

What if they bit opposite sides of the same rice cracker and started eating, like her Valentine's Day delusion last time, that would feel so—

(No way no way no way! That would be too much! Besides, Cow Tits is here!)

Fear shook her head repeatedly to dispel the notion. Although the question "if no one was around, will you do it?" also flashed through her mind, she decided not to dwell any further on the issue.

In any case, eating this one rice cracker should be enough. Although she did not quite understand, her mood felt much better already. What exactly had she been worrying over? There was no need to imitate anyone, just do whatever she wanted without holding back, in her own manner—She could not possibly be unhappy if she did that. Perhaps up until now, she had simply perceived everything as more difficult than necessary.

"...Okay! Now that I've bought tasty, local rice crackers, let's continue onwards! Fushimi Inari Shrine is next? Ohoh, what a huge and magnificent door! It's both white and red, like those Shameless Shrine Maidens. Come to think of it, I'll need to buy them souvenirs! What should I buy?"

"Wow, eating rice crackers does make you a hundred times more lively after all. Hold on, Fear, no need to rush."

Fear was walking at the very front, meanwhile discreetly taking out the key in her pocket, fueled with partial confidence.

The key that had just turned 40% red earlier was now 50%. No, 55%.

The red area was clearly increasing.

Hmm. Very well.

Despite not understanding how it worked.

Continuing at this rate, it should be fine.

...So long as she did not forget whose face to recall while infusing her emotions into the key.

Part 10

Nagasone Kotetsu closed her eyes and recalled.

How much time had elapsed since the escape and pursuit began?

In the darkness, Kotetsu was facing off against Un Izoey. It was during a moment's pause that descended while she was on a mad dash to chase the fleeing Yamimagari Pakuaki. At that instant, Kotetsu and Un Izoey had stopped in a remote corner that survived from ancient streets.

Kotetsu crushed the knife in the palm of her hand. More accurately, she shredded the knife in her hand, turning it into a pile of fragments. Kotetsu had already shredded a number of knives, but this act still could not pose a threat. The girl, whose skin color almost seemed to meld into the night, backed away swiftly and used her foot to draw out a new knife from under her skirt. No sense of decency. Ladyfolk should attach greater importance to their conduct—That was what Kotetsu currently believed.

In any case, this girl was too much of a hindrance.

Kotetsu's mission, the command issued by the master, was to obtain the Indulgence Disk. In other words, this meant taking the box containing the Indulgence Disk as well as capturing Yamimagari Pakuaki who surely knew how to open it. Although the box was currently in this dark-skinned girl's possession, Kotetsu knew where she must return eventually and could take care of that later. Right now, it was imperative to catch up to Yamimagari Pakuaki.

Upholding «Integrity» even at the cost of laying down one's life, Kotetsu leaned forward and sprinted fiercely again. What needed to be done was

still the same as before. No matter what, she had to dispose of this girl who was blocking the way, then prevent Yamimagari Pakuaki from escaping.

But just at this moment, a voice rang out in the darkness. It was not the dark-skinned girl's voice.

"Oh my, aren't you charging around madly? Your simplicity is so pure that it can be considered a virtue."

"Lab Chief, please run away as quickly as possible if you have the time to speak. This is the hope I'm hoping."

"On the contrary, I hope you can regard this as evidence of my absolute trust in you, believing that you will surely handle this."

Kotetsu could not pinpoint the source of the voice. In any case, it was somewhere in the surrounding darkness. If even her senses could not locate it... Perhaps some sort of Wathe was being used. Considering his identity, this was very probable.

"Have you finally given up? Then show yourself now. Truth be told, I shall not grant you a swift death."

"Hahaha, it's precisely the opposite... I am simply offering you a bit of advice to commend you for your relentless pursuit. If you think carefully, there are three of them but only one of you. Quite a disadvantage in terms of numbers."

Trying not to waste time, Kotetsu relied on instinct and charged in the direction where she thought the voice was coming from. Naturally, another intense battle began with the dark-skinned girl who came to obstruct her. She was using strange tactics involving both feet. It was tricky to deal with due to unfamiliarity but Kotetsu had no intention of admitting defeat.

"I shall repeat myself again. Even I can't open that box. You can only use that key—This is the premise that I must ask you to believe. Besides, I don't even need that thing, yet you're pursuing me relentlessly. If I really had a way of opening the box, I would have thrown my hands up to surrender and give you the Disk. I'm quite a calculating person, you know?"

"..."

Mixed with sighs, that voice sounded very sincere. Kotetsu could not help but think: perhaps he really was speaking the truth.

"So, as for my advice—in other words, I'm letting you know what you should do to activate the key. That's because it looks like it'll be easier for you to understand if I told you the specific method directly."

Kotetsu and the dark-skinned girl deflected each other's attacks and pulled apart slightly. Readjusting her stance, Kotetsu took the opportunity to speak:

"Hmph, what would you have me do?"

"You hate Muramasa, don't you?"

The sudden question caused Kotetsu to glare into the darkness, halting the step she was about to take forward. The response came back with a presence like that of someone enjoying a show.

"No, more accurately, perhaps it might not be hatred—But let's simplify things for now. As a fellow sword, especially a renowned sword, it is only natural that you harbor certain feelings towards her."

"...So what?"

"In other words, you can use those feelings. Just earlier, you looked like you really wanted to vent and act out those feelings on her, but due to the mission of retrieving the Indulgence Disk, you had no choice but to force yourself to disregard them. But now, you don't need to hold back anymore, because the two matters are related."

For some reason, her legs did not move. Kotetsu was suddenly struck by the notion that it would not hurt to listen first to what this man had to say.

"Since you hate Muramasa, there must be reasons for the hatred. Didn't I mention earlier? Hatred is a veritable and genuine emotion. Hence, in your case, confirming this matter is absolutely not a waste of effort."

"Confirm..."

"That's right, after confirming, once you reach the conclusion that she is indeed deserving of hatred, you will hate her once again. But if you reach a contrary conclusion, you—"

"Truth be told, that is absolutely impossible."

"—Yes, this is only speculation. In any case, when the time comes, you will possess a certain honest emotion. In other words, in terms of raw

materials, you possess emotions that are very convenient to use, because activating the key requires 'behavior that stirs up emotions.' It is absolutely not a waste of time and considering your single-mindedness, those feelings will prove to be extremely useful."

Kotetsu recalled that woman's face.

Muramasa, Muramasa, Muramasa—

She was a sword. As a tool, swords were meant for killing people.

The same went for Kotetsu. Due to humans thirsting for this purpose and her outstanding abilities, humans desired her for the simple goal of achieving this clear purpose. Kotetsu's sharpness could be said to be peerless. Hence, swordsmen wished to obtain Kotetsu, completing their missions while feeling satisfied with Kotetsu's sharpness. In other words—

Killing people.

Hence, that was why she was cursed.

No need for shame nor ignorant surprise. This was a perfectly logical and natural development. This ought to be the way of excellent swords, swords passed down since antiquity. Precisely due to excellence, they were used continually for murder. Even with a change of owners, they were still sought by people, then repeatedly receiving the resentment of the murdered, they were cursed. Hence, throughout the entire process all this time, Kotetsu always believed that this was her only path. This was a renowned sword's unavoidable history of development. Cursed only because of excellence, becoming even more excellent because of being cursed. Unconcerned by the rumors of curses, these wielders simply sought practical utility in the aspect of murder.

Ah, precisely because of that—

So long as it was a natural development, so long as they accepted their curses matter-of-factly, Kotetsu believed that for swords like them, in order for them to be cursed, humans actually desired for them to be cursed from the start, did they not? Hence, swords ought to willingly accept curses as the best sharpening stones, should they not?

Kotetsu had always kept this proper way of life in sight. Clear-cut, filled with pride, she had always lived without compromise, believing this was herself.

Nevertheless—

Muramasa, that blade praised as the sword among swords, possessing peerless sharpness and unparalleled power, the existence bearing the name that Kotetsu had even gone as far as to idolize in the past, was not like that.

The admiration in her heart was instantly rendered into disappointment, turned into resentment for feeling betrayed. These were the feelings currently residing in the bottom of Kotetsu's heart. Occupying her chest, these feelings that were almost about to overflow.

Without realizing it, Kotetsu had clenched her fist tightly.

"So, that's my advice to you. I've also succeeded in buying some time, so there shouldn't be a problem, Un Izoey. You should go back too. Isn't the terrifying shovel waiting for you?"

"Affirmative..."

Kotetsu suddenly regained her senses and thought: "I've been had!" But it was too late.

Only true and silent darkness remained in the surroundings.

This darkness was very similar to the feelings she had recalled, the feelings she harbored towards a certain absolutely unforgivable target.

Definite and concrete emotions. Emotions that must be faced squarely. Emotions that could not be evaded. Emotions that could not be dispelled.

When facing off square, what could she do as a sword?

It was obvious.

Simply chop apart the eyesore and advance towards where she ought to be.

Hence—Kotetsu opened both eyes.

The darkness that needed to be chopped apart was currently right by her feet.

Experiencing serenity and mysteriousness through her skin, Konoha walked by Haruaki's side with neither haste nor languidity.

Before their eyes was the thousand torii gates of Fushime Inari Shrine. Konoha did not care to count but she would not be surprised if there really were that many. Spaced narrowly apart, the countless torii formed something like a tunnel. If one were to stare ahead continuously, one would suddenly lose a sense of distance. This was a dreamlike path of red that made the viewer feel as though this imagery would stretch endlessly ahead, forever and ever. Walking along the stone slabs, their footsteps sounded like some kind of ritual as they weaved through the openings of the torii.

The thousand torii gates were located on side of Inari Mountain, resulting in a gently sloping upward path. Hence, one would begin to sweat slightly simply by walking. Konoha smiled at the person beside her and said:

"This is truly excellent exercise. Also, the atmosphere is so calm and quiet... If this were near our home, I would surely add it to my list of favorite walking trails and take frequent strolls here."

"I also enjoy places with this kind of mysterious atmosphere. But in fact, just passing through the torii near our home already makes me out of breath. Also, I quite like ordinary shrines."

"Hold it right there, Haruaki, that's not the current issue here. We should be smart enough to see that this girl means 'losing weight' when she mentions taking walks. In other words, apart from the udders, Cow Tits has meat growing in other pitiful body parts. Hence, for her own good, we should mock her for her futile efforts with our lukewarm gazes—"

A silver mass, an affront to the eyes, forced its way between them but Konoha ignored it, using the outside of her arm to push it back forcibly. Then as though nothing had happened, she continued the conversation:

"But if you're not careful in your selection, there are some shrines where it's not only impossible to find serenity but may even have fifteen identical shrine maidens running out of the woodwork. And one would often encounter scary incidents or indecent accidents. Hence—umm, if we take strolls together, it would guard against those possibilities."

"But taking a stroll to that shrine would really be quite far."

"That must be because she wants to burn off the most calories by walking as far as possible! That's what my powers of deduction are telling me! Let's shelve this issue and decide what we should buy as souvenirs for them? It's probably best to get something in quantity, right?"

The silver little head had not learned its lesson and tried to force its way in again. Konoha sighed. How blissful it would be if she could walk here with him along this little path, just the two of them. However, there were currently many people in the way. Not only was there Fear who had been hanging around all this time, as much as Konoha wished to forget, but there was also the rest of the group behind them: Kirika, Un Izoey, Kururi and Bivorio. Even—

Even above?

Konoha reflexively pushed down on Fear's shoulder and shoved her towards Haruaki, forcing her to act as a meat shield. However, this was only just in case.

With an extremely high probability, the enemy's target was Konoha herself.

"Take this—!"

"...!"

Konoha pounced on the stone-paved ground and rolled forward. This would probably expose the view under her skirt to him but there was no time to dwell on that. Next, Konoha swiftly turned around to confirm the situation.

The thousand torii gates were not packed densely together. From one of the gaps, above a torii behind Haruaki's group, the one who had jumped down to attack was, of course—

"Kotetsu!"

"Mura... masa...!"

Dressed in Wa Lolita style with a pale-blue Shinsengumi haori on top, Kotetsu glared vigorously at Konoha, the stone slab by her feet gouged and lifted up completely. This was because Kotetsu had used the momentum of her fall to power her tiger claws, swinging her arms down fiercely, imbued with the power of the sword.

Konoha had taken a flip, afraid that Kotetsu might attack Haruaki and the others, but such worries proved to be unnecessary. Kotetsu charged again quickly to attack her. Despite fighting unarmed, one could still describe her swordsmanship as extremely bold and forthright given the way they fought. Despite unrefined, Kotetsu's continuous attacks seemed to rely on being unrefined as a strength. Using power to overwhelm cautious predictions and techniques, it was an attack style filled with vigor.

"Take... this—!"

"Guh...!"

Kotetsu had seized the initiative. Konoha retreated and blocked the attack, rushing into the trees and vegetation away from Inari Mountain's sightseeing route. This was actually better because being seen would be bad and they definitely should avoid accidentally using too much force chopping down torii gates, thereby damaging precious cultural heritage.

Evading the thrusts of the tiger claws, Konoha either used knife hand strikes to block or kicked to counterattack. But the opponent would then use such openings to attack her destabilized lower body. Konoha gave up on attacking and focused back on defense.

Before they knew it, Konoha was chased to an unmaintained area on the side of the mountain. As a product of nature, there was still a stretch of fairly open ground. Here, Konoha decided to switch from defense to offense. Deliberately spinning her body a greater number of times, she made use of the wider space to handle her enemy.

"Why are you attacking me!?"

"I have no obligation to answer you!"

"Can't you oblige yourself as a fellow Japanese sword?"

"—Truth be told! That would... This point—!"

Although the space was relatively more open, that was all there was to it. Swept into the battle, the surrounding trees were cut down one after another, even tree trunks were blown away while branches and leaves fluttered through the air. Conversely, this greatly increased the amount of usable area.

Branches fell between the two of them, blocking line of sight for an instant. Using this momentary chance, Konoha predicted her opponent's

movements, meanwhile moving herself to a position beyond the enemy's expectation, then as the view cleared, she thrust the base of her palm forward. Due to Kotetsu moving to where she predicted, Konoha struck her squarely in the abdomen, sending her flying. Nevertheless, Kotetsu used her arms to protect herself at the last instant, thereby preventing significant damage. It would not be surprising for Konoha's strike to end the match against an ordinary enemy, but apparently, ordinary methods were not enough to defeat Kotetsu.

In order to prevent the enemy from noticing her nervousness, Konoha intentionally spoke in a confident and leisurely tone of voice:

"As one would think, it's tricky to face off against a similar opponent. Wouldn't you agree?"

"...!"

"Isn't it time for you to tell me why you're targeting me? Have we met somewhere before? Were you present at the Battle of Sekigahara? Or was it during the late shogunate period?"

"I... have never met you... on the battlefield."

Kotetsu answered out of breath.

"But I know you. Muramasa. The demon blade that bears an absolutely irreconcilable grudge against the Tokugawa."

"As much as I find it a little embarrassing, that is quite a well-known fact indeed. If it's just this level of knowledge and recognition, then I know you too. Kotetsu. Unrefined yet incomparably sharp. A trenchant blade capable of effortlessly slicing through three or four bodies at once."

Kotetsu's expression seemed to show wavering. But perhaps that was only Konoha's imagination.

In any case, they were kindred. Whether as curved blades forged from fine steel or in another aspect that could not be ignored at all. Hence, Konoha could not help but ask:

"Why were you cursed?"

Hearing this question, Kotetsu first blinked slowly before exhaling and asking in return:

"Then let me ask you, why were you cursed?"

Konoha was instantly rendered speechless. The answer was exceedingly simple yet so complicated that it was difficult to explain in brief.

"You are unable to answer, right? Because we are weapons, we are blades, we are swords. We, who stand at the pinnacle and have experienced the most—truth be told—to be cursed is only natural to begin with."

Don't be ridiculous. Konoha thought strongly to herself. However, she could feel her own heart cool down rapidly.

"—Wouldn't you agree?"

"How inane."

Konoha answered swiftly. Even she could feel sub-zero temperature spreading from her cold heart to her eyes. Nevertheless, surely her gaze, directed towards the kin before her eyes, carried emotions apart from coldness.

Indeed, for example—Pity.

Konoha slowly drew in a breath then said:

"For a fellow sword like you who knows not your purpose, allow me to offer you a suggestion—Would you like to join me in forgetting the past? Would you like to wipe off the blood from the tempering pattern of your blade and resheathe it? You probably can understand after seeing the contemporary world, right? The era of the sword has already ended."

"Ha!"

A sound. A sound coming from a throat. Kotetsu's face was strangely stiffened to produce an expressionless face, In that instant, this reaction was completely baffling.

But a beat later—

"Ha... Hahaha... Hahahahahahahaha! No good, no good, I knew it was no good, it really is no good! Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhh, wrong! Wrong, wrong, this is wrong! This is completely wrong—!"

Starting with a laugh, Kotetsu's words turned into a chaotic mix of emotions within the blink of an eye, turning into despair, anger, disappointment, regret—as well as hatred.

"I knew it... No good, Muramasa... I... towards you!"

Konoha could feel Kotetsu's entire body filled with power, exuding negative emotions that dwarfed what she had previously displayed. A peaceful solution seemed to be out of reach after all. Konoha readied a combat stance and said finally:

"Although I have no reason to worry for you, seeing as you've received that key, now is probably not the time to be doing this. Honestly, I feel that this is just a meaningless fight."

"Meaningless? This is not meaningless, not meaningless! My feelings—My hatred towards you is right here! This is the proof!"

Kotetsu glared viciously at Konoha and took out the key from her pocket. Holding the key up before her narrowed eyes, she targeted the key with her murderous gaze.

Before Konoha's eyes, the key's red area was rapidly increasing.

Only 50% a moment ago, it had now increased to 70% or so.

"Impossible...!"

Konoha whispered in surprise but reached a revelation at the same time. Negative emotions. Indeed, Pakuaki had mentioned that negative emotions were a type of a feeling too. Kotetsu was intentionally using the hatred she held for Konoha as a source of emotions to activate the key?

Probably satisfied with Konoha's surprised look, Kotetsu placed the key back into her pocket, still with a vicious expression:

"But it's not over yet. This is still not enough. Muramasa, duel with me. Truth be told, your only remaining value is in allow me to generate that type of trash-like emotion. Allow me to absorb that useless disappointment and contempt once again. If you find this insulting, then show me the true light of your blade!"

While speaking, Kotetsu used the tip of her foot to kick up a branch on the ground, reaching out to grab it in her hand, then bringing it to her lips—

"...!"

She licked. Out from her dainty lips, a pink tongue extended, licking the surface of the branch in an inexplicably salacious manner, back and forth, tracing out a moist trail of saliva.

Next, Kotetsu looked at the branch in her hand and said softly:

"Go forth and pierce, my will—"

Konoha realized instantly. That was a sword. At this moment, the branch was imbued with the characteristics of a sword. The street lamp was able to chop off Kirika's arm last night for the same reason, right? Although Konoha did not know why licking was necessary, it was probably a ritual using saliva as a medium to confer objects with the characteristics of swords.

"I can probably manage that kind of move... But if anything, I would call it a little trick that I'm not well-versed in."

"Whether it is a little trick or not, you may confirm for yourself. This is me. I am not just a simple lump of decrepit iron. As the story goes, a samurai only managed to pierce stone with a arrow because he intended to shoot a tiger—Hence the name, Kotetsu!"^[12]

The girl exuded the same type of aura as before when employing tiger-clawed strikes. Powerfully direct, boldly forthright, courageously straightforward. However, the volume of vigor had clearly increased. Right now, her presence was akin to fighting spirit that would deflect everything on touch, a sword-like presence.

Lifting the sword she had forged, Kotetus aimed it at Konoha's eyes and said quietly:

"En garde. I am Nagasone Kotetsu Nyuudou Okisato—known as the supreme trenchant blade possessing peerless, unparalleled sharpness!"

"Guh!?"

Saying that, Kotetsu charged forward with god-like speed. Konoha deflected using her karate chop but felt a stinging pain where she blocked. A minor cut appeared there. Konoha was filled with disbelief at losing in a battle of slicing.

"That I can even rival Muramasa, the rumors are apparently true!"

"Don't get... too full of yourself—!"

Vigor and conviction was necessary. Konoha invoked her power to the maximum and fought with Kotetsu's sword. Another wave of intense pain. But at the same time, the wooden stick in the opponent's hand was also chopped in half.

"Indeed, a single sword cannot finish things. Go forth and pierce, my will!"

Kotetsu picked up another branch within arm's reach. This time, she attacked directly without removing the branching twigs and leaves. Konoha raised her knife hand to engage again. Kotetsu's fighting style was similar to Fourteen the cursed house and Kokoro Pentangeli who created swords of wreckage—They all created weapons during battle before attacking. But unlike them, Kotetsu mainly fought at close range and rather than relying on quantity over quality, the power of her weapons were on an entirely different level.

(I... To think... Take this!)

Konoha had not suffered any critical injuries, but that was all. She was covered all over with countless minor cuts. The color flowing out from her body was also annoying her—or rather, she was feeling excitement. How long ago was it since she last had this feeling?

...Excitement? I'm feeling happy? It shouldn't be happiness. So disgusting. Really? Don't lie. Shut up. Too dangerous. Having accidentally released the restraints several months earlier, the self-hypnosis of fearing blood had yet to be re-established. Training was incomplete. Hence, blood, blood, blood. Even upon blinking, the color lingered beneath the eyelids. I feel excitement. A hot feeling in the lower abdomen was pleading an itching impulse.

Give me more blood.

(Shut up.)

Give me more battles.

(Shut up!)

Suppress it quickly. The only thing able to substitute for the released self-hypnosis, to calm my unsettled self down, was willpower. Don't get devoured by my own power. Don't get devoured by the curse occupying my body!

"Huff... Huff...!"

"I am quite suspicious."

Standing before the panting Konoha, Kotetsu whispered in a very disappointed manner:

"Truth be told, you are wavering too much. Whether towards hatred, disappointment or rejecting those emotions. Hence, you turn out to be even more boring than I imagined. Judging from the way things look, more time will be needed to fill up the key's remaining area. Should I consider alternative means...?"

"..."

Kotetsu did not show any openings while speaking. Currently held in her hand was a slender branch resembling a needle. Konoha guarded against thrusting strikes but also could not ignore slashing attacks.

To be honest, her stamina was slowly getting depleted. She must find another solution.

No, she already knew. She knew early on the other solution that was available.

She simply refused to admit it.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi», Curse Calling!"

The voice entering her ears now was the answer.

Even without asking for help, those girls were going to hurry their way here eventually.

To rely on this type of passive solution, as though willingly accepting assistance from rivals in love, Konoha found it more difficult to accept than anything.

Swinging the hatchet, Fear charged into the fray. The enemy's weapon was a branch. Was this some kind of joke? But for some reason, the branch deflected the hatchet with a sensation like that of an extremely solid Japanese sword. It did not feel like the branch was severed at all.

"Konoha! Are you okay!?"

Haruaki could be seen climbing out of the bushes slightly later, rushing towards Konoha with a frantic expression. Konoha's state was quite tragic to behold. Countless minor blade lacerations on her arms and legs, some of them still bleeding. Her clothes were also shredded, an unsightly state. Fear thought to herself: to think a sword would be beaten by another sword, how ludicrous. But for some reason, Fear did not feel like mocking her openly at all.

Fear simply felt agitated and poured strength into her arms, trying to deal the enemy a painful blow.

"Take this!"

Releasing the power of violence without restraint, she attacked Kotetsu. Kotetsu frowned but did not dodge, instead swinging her tree branch sword to engage Fear's hatchet squarely, resulting in a battle of pure strength. Fear did not know if the enemy was simply courageous or only knew this one method of fighting.

With a sound akin to inorganic matter shattering, both sides' weapons bounced back. Kotetsu's branch could be seen striking a nearby tree after bouncing back, chopping down the tree trunk instantaneously and extremely naturally.

So this was the result of using a similar weapon, a slicing tool. In that case, what if she tried a different type of weapon?

"Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern»!"

Fear turned the emulated cube into the spiked metal club which could overwhelm the enemy more easily using mass. Applying her full bodyweight, Fear swung the metal club down with all her might. While Kotetsu clicked her tongue in annoyance, the tree branch sword in her hand flew away, spinning in circles. Indeed, even though it had acquired the nature and hardness of a sword, it still was not a sword. There was no hilt for the user to grip firmly.

The metal club sank into the ground next to the enemy who had lost her weapon. Too lazy to lift it back up, Fear decided to make use of the rare chance. In that case—Fear transformed her weapon again.

"Mechanism No.10 gripping type, compressing form: «Iron Coffin of Lissa», Curse Calling!"

She intended to lock the enemy away in a compressed space, surrounded by metal on all sides. However, the six walls needed a few seconds' worth of time to envelope Kotetsu completely. During this duration—

"Trying to execute me!? No thank you! Go forth and pierce—My will!"

With lightning speed, Kotetsu picked up the chopped down tree trunk from just now, lifting it high while sticking her tongue out to lick its surface like a light kiss. The massive tree trunk was instantly turned into something akin to a steel support pillar, briefly hindering the iron coffin's compressive action. Seizing this chance, Kotetsu swiftly escaped from the iron coffin's slowly closing space, even retrieving the wooden log that had saved her a second earlier.

Using both hands to lug the log next to her waist, Kotetsu looked like she was wielding a spear as she glared at Fear. Despite the unwieldiness of the weapon, her overall stance showed no openings. She was probably used to fighting in this manner as well.

As an opponent, there was nothing lacking about Kotetsu in any way. Fear concluded that the stronger the enemy, the more she needed to mercilessly bring out the powerful violence she possessed. That was all. Which torture instrument should she show the enemy next? Just as Fear was thinking that—

"«Tragic Black River»!"

Arriving hastily a step later, Kirika extended her cursed belt towards Kotetsu as soon as she discerned the situation. What reliable backup support.

Using one foot as a pivot, Kotetsu spun the log in her hands along with her body like a tornado. The unwieldy but deadly weapon instantly severed the belt. Kirika frowned.

"A log...? Absolutely ridiculous. What kind of log is that? It even severed «Tragic»."

"Despite the unusual shape, it seems to possess a sword's power. Don't be careless, Kirika."

Then arriving next were Kururi and Bivorio. Kururi aside, Bivorio was physically just an ordinary woman, so she could not help being this slow. Finally, Un Izoey sluggishly poked her head out from the bushes—Her

sluggishness was probably deliberate. There was probably no one here more used to running along a mountain path overgrown with vegetation. Surely, she must be staying at tail end of the group in order to follow Yamimagari Pakuaki's orders and fulfill her duty as the keeper of the box.

Seeing the new pursuers, Kotetsu then glanced at Konoha who was catching her breath and muttered:

"Truth be told, because Muramasa turned out to be surprisingly boring, my plan is in slight disarray... In the ideal case, the key would have been completed already. Looks like I set my expectations too high."

"What are you talking about?"

Without replying to Fear's question, Kotetsu swung the log horizontally at waist level. No, attacking directly at this distance would be too far away—It was a throw. Possessing a sword's sharpness, the log rotated parallel to the ground while flying through the air. Its simple "length" was now converted into a threat. Fear originally wanted to duck down to dodge but then that would mean leaving Haruaki and others to fend for themselves behind her.

"Tsk—Mechanism No.23 hole type, thorned surface form: «Maranatha»!"

"Take this!"

Fear lifted up the steel plate of nails sideways, using it as a shield to block the log. At the same time, a certain person rushed to her side, carrying the wobbling eyesores of massive breasts, using a spinning kick to deflect the log.

"...What now, you're back to being the usual Cow Tits? I was thinking you'd be crying after getting bullied."

"I was simply feeling a little unwell. Please do not belittle me."

As soon as that guy's safety was at risk, this girl would always stand up no matter how serious her injuries. This was the only thing Fear was certain.

Despite her reluctance, Fear decided to assist Konoha in retaliating. Which torture instrument should she pick next? Which tool out of a limited list? If one was not enough, she currently had a second one. As much as she did not want to use it, when push came to shove, there would be no choice. Come, come—

Fear allowed her body and mind to switch over officially to a combat mode then turned her gaze forward again.

Then she saw Kotetsu's back. For an instant, failing to understand what this scene meant, she remained rooted to the spot.

"Nuu? ...Hold on! Are you running away!?"

After launching the log to pin down Fear and the other's movements, Kotetsu had turned around and broke into a run.

The situation would not improve at this rate even if she were allowed to escape. Just as Fear was about to rush forward—

"Go forth and pierce, my will—!"

Kotetsu picked up a flat piece of rock that was rolling by her feet, licked it then swiftly threw it in Fear's direction. Fear used «Maranatha» to block again. Naturally, rather than the sound of a rock's impact, the ear-piercing noise of steel colliding with steel was heard... It was almost like a shuriken. Due to the preparatory motions required, Kotetsu was unable to fire at will without restraint. A single-shot projectile was not scary but sufficient to obstruct opponents from advancing. This was because there was a crowd behind Fear and Konoha that needed protection.

Kotetsu looked back from time to time, firing rock-swords intermittently, meanwhile continuing to sprint forward. Every time, Fear and Konoha had no choice but to halt their steps. Using this opening, Kotetsu easily reached the greenery in the back and jumped into the bushes, disappearing from sight.

Staying on guard for attacks from dead angles, Fear and Konoha ran over to those bushes, but by this time, Kotetsu's presence had vanished completely from the surrounding area.

"She escaped..."

Turning the torture tool back into the Rubik's cube, Fear stuffed it into her pocket while saying:

"By the way, why does that girl want to attack you? Is it because those cow udders are too much of an eyesore? I don't blame her. Because she's too pitiful, her tragic chest looks even flatter than mine. No, I'm actually average in size, so what I mean is that it must be tough being smaller than average."

"Sigh... Bust sizes don't matter, okay? But I'm not too sure. In any case, I seem to be rubbing her the wrong way... But I have no clue why at all. Oh, but she basically has a goal. It seems like she is planning to use her negative emotions towards me, like hatred for example, to accumulate enough feelings to activate the key. But apparently, she did not accumulate as much volume as planned."

"Using negative... emotions...?"

Without warning, accompanied by an ominous presence, Fear felt something stir restlessly in the depths of her heart.

...As though trying to make her notice a certain type of emotion that she had yet to notice to this date.

From the pocket on the other side of the one where the Rubik's cube was stuffed, Fear secretly took out her key, taking care to avoid anyone noticing.

A key that was supposed to sense heightened emotions. Although Fear could not explain it fully, she had finally just figured out how to strengthen her emotions, agonizing on her own and getting impatient, the key reaching 50% after much difficulty, but now—

Very effortlessly, it had gone 70% red.

Fear was shocked and alarmed. Then immediately she asked herself:

What had happened?

During the duration from eating the fox rice cracker just now till now, what had happened?

"Ah..."

She had expressed hostility towards Kotetsu. She wanted to defeat her. She wanted to harm her.

She wanted—to kill her.

She had produce negative emotions.

The warm feelings that took so much effort to accumulate almost seemed like an illusion.

In merely an instant, dark emotions had almost dyed the entire key bright red.

What did this represent?

(...No. No matter who, everyone is like this to some extent. This is only natural. So it's not... It's not anything to be alarmed about—)

Fear gripped the key tightly as though not wanting anyone to discover it while whispering in her own heart.

But once manifested, this suspicion was not going to disappear. Instead, it kept repeating in her mind.

Despairingly, it repeated nonstop.

Ah.

Sure enough—

Compared to loving someone—Am I an object that is more suited to cursing someone?

Chapter 4 - Reason of Turning Crimson / "the stage where it starts up"

Part 1

It was the final night during the school excursion. Although this fact carried all sorts of significance, Haruaki and company currently had no choice but to do the same as the other students for now.

"How did it go? What kind of paradise was it? Me, I was forced carry all the shopping, almost dislocating my shoulders! Damn it!" Back to the hotel, Haruaki was finishing dinner while enduring Taizou's interrogation. "Hey hey! How did it go!?" The girls were also hassled by Kana's questioning, so things were about the same for them. That said, Haruaki had no idea what Taizou and Kana meant exactly by "How?"

They took this opportunity to take a bath first. After agreeing with Fear and the girls to meet at the lobby after bathing, Haruaki and the boys went to the bath together. In an attempt to avoid being questioned, he asked Taizou and Animori about their day. Despite grumbling nonstop, they still seemed quite contented to have a chance to accompany the super beauty Shiraho and her group on this trip. "My only regret is that I didn't get a chance to go 'Please allow your humble servant to help massage your exhausted legs'—"Although Animori made a creepy remark that gave the listener goosebumps, Haruaki decided to pretend he did not hear it.

After a bath, Haruaki parted ways with Taizou and Animori who were returning to the room, then headed to the washroom alone. On the way back, he was slightly lost and happened to pass by a certain entrance that led to what appeared to be the hotel's backyard.

(Oh—I didn't know there was this kind of place?)

Seeing as it was their final night at this hotel, it probably would not hurt to go adventuring once in an unexplored part. After all, Fear and the others were girls and would probably take some more time to finish their bath. It was also a way to kill time until it was time to meet up. Furthermore, a simple reason was that it seemed like it would be very comfortable to experience the cool breeze of the night after the body was heated up by the bath.

Borrowing the clogs placed there for communal use, Haruaki entered the backyard. The space was large enough to plant a row of trees along the

boundary wall enclosing the hotel. The moon in the night sky was quite beautiful and the evening breeze was very comfortable and refreshing.

Spacing out, Haruaki pondered the situation here on.

According to Konoha, Kotetsu's key had already accumulated quite a lot of power. Then at the moment of activation, they must keep an eye on Kotetsu at the scene.

Supposing Kotetsu activated her key faster than Fear and the others then arrived before Un Izoey, the keeper of the box, Un Izoey was supposed to hand the box over without resistance. Pakuaki had issued orders for her to do so. But the only comforting fact was that Un Izoey had told them: "I will not resist. However—It is your freedom to hinder the opponent if you choose. I add this kind of addition." In other words, even if they lost in the race to activate the key, they still had the last resort of preventing Kotetsu from approaching Un Izoey. Hence, Un Izoey must absolutely not be allowed to leave their line of sight... Right now, Fear and the girls were probably taking a bath with her.

But of course, the fastest method was to activate their keys before Kotetsu. Was this possible?

(I wonder how is Konoha's progress... Fear is also acting a little weird...)

Haruaki recalled that on the way back from Fushimi Inari Shrine, Fear had a very gloomy expression on her face. Although she would answer when spoken to, Haruaki always found her in deep thought or sighing listlessly whenever he paid sudden attention to her. What on earth happened? Haruaki decided to ask her properly later.

Konoha seemed to be making good progress. Although she suffering some minor physical injuries in the fight against Kotetsu, what remained next was a race to beat Kotetsu in key activation.

At this point, Haruaki suddenly felt doubtful.

They were set to take the bullet train in the afternoon to make their way home. Before that, collective sightseeing was scheduled, the same as on the first and second days of the trip. Was there enough time to activate the keys by then? Even if they could not make it in time, Un Izoey was going back with them anyway, so there was no issue there, but if that happened, was Kotetsu going to give chase? Of course, that was not a problem for Fear and Konoha, but what about the other person—

"If this matter is not resolved by tomorrow, what will Kururi do...?"

"Hmm? You're asking what I'll do?"

"...W-Wooooooooah!"

"Arghhhh, idiot, shut up, that's so freaking incompetent! It'd be bad if someone came over!"

While Haruaki was muttering to himself, Kururi happened to jump over the wall, landing in the backyard here. Due to the suddenness, Haruaki could not help but scream out, causing Kururi to hastily and gruffly cover his mouth. While finding it difficult to breathe, Haruaki also sensed the softness of Kururi's hand and the fragrance of clean soap, probably due to her job in the food business. Who could have expected her to be so serious at her job?

Kururi slowly withdrew her hand, finally giving Haruaki a chance to speak:

"W-Why are you here?"

"...I came looking for you to discuss things. But walking in directly through the front door seemed wrong. Just as I was wondering what to do, climbing over the wall, I happened to see you so I came in. That's all."

"I get the reason but appearing in that way will give people heart attacks... Couldn't you have called?"

"This isn't something that can be solved over the phone. Freaking incompetent."

"Oh... well, Fear and the girls are still in the bath, so why don't you wait until later if you have something to say. Oh right, I happen to have a question for you. We're going home tomorrow, what are your plans?"

"That's exactly the issue. I still have a job, so it's not like I could go back with you. But as a matter of duty, it's not like I could say: 'Okay, I'm leaving the rest to you guys, thanks.' So I've decided to end things before you guys leave tomorrow."

"...How?"

Beneath the moonlight, Kururi frowned after hearing Haruaki's question. Then she pouted and grumbled, sulking for quite a while:

"I said it already... I'm looking for you to discuss something, so I don't need that bunch of girls. Rather, it'd be better with you alone..."

Finally, Kururi spoke up as though in resignation:

"So! Hurry up and tell me, what kind of present usually makes boys happy!?"

"...Huh?"

What an unexpected question. Clenching her fists, Kururi blushed and turned her face away.

Haruaki tilted his head in puzzlement, gathering all the information in his mind, searching for clues among them. A key that required strengthened emotions. A deadline by tomorrow. Present. Things that Bivorio seemed to have said. Oh right, I think she mentioned his birthday—

"Oh... Because it's Kouichirou-san's birthday tomorrow, you're going to give him a present?"

"Wha..!? How did you guess from just one question I asked!? Are you a psychic? Damn it, freaking incompetent! No, that's not it, umm... I don't feel anything towards that guy, okay, it's absolutely impossible to begin with! But he's basically a partner at work and has take good care of me ever since I arrived, so anyway, gratitude surely counts as a type of emotion, so... That person said, this is a good opportunity for me to express myself, that's why I have no choice—Hey! Are you listening!"

"I'm listening, I'm listening."

After listening to Kururi's dishonest explanation, Haruaki smiled wryly and said:

"But this is really sudden. His birthday is tomorrow, right?"

"If I rush out to buy it now, shops that are open would still be open. Otherwise, I could still buy it early in the morning tomorrow. Cut the crap and hurry. Tell me what kind of present is the best. What's incompetent is that I've never given any present to anyone. Also, I don't have too much money either. Remember to consider these before giving me suggestions."

"I'm really not sure if my suggestions might be useful.. But anyway, let's think together. Right, I'd like to know about his background such as age or what kind of hobbies and interests he has, for example."

"Huh? As if anyone would know, I certainly have no interest in finding out. At most, all I know is that he's called Niimi Kouichirou, male, twenty-years-old, a university student majoring in economics, haven't joined a club, hobby is bass fishing, favorite food is super spicy curry with naan bread, his Mexican neighbor is very noisy, he lives in a one-room apartment, his little brother is an anime geek, he's a fan of the Hanshin Tigers and also a fan of the interesting foreigner, Trey Moore, who used to play for that baseball team."

"..."

"What's with that look?"

Part 2

She witnessed that scene purely out of coincidence.

It was not her original goal. But if someone were to ask her: "Does the original goal even count as a goal?" She would have a difficult time answering straight away. She had come to this place with the notion of not wasting time, but in reality, she did not believe it was actually meaningful.

At this moment, a presence appeared behind her. She looked back in shock but instantly relaxed her tense shoulders as soon as she realized it was a familiar presence.

Appearing from behind her, the person stood by her side to watch the people she had been peeking at. The person smiled profoundly and said:

"How unguarded of them."

"...They are probably thinking that we will not attack in crowded hotel with bystanders everywhere. But to think he would specifically walk to somewhere deserted, truth be told, it is extremely foolish I must say."

"Progress report?"

After some hesitation, she decided to answer truthfully.

"A slight problem remains. I was originally planning to attack Muramasa again as soon as an opening presented itself—However, how should I put this? I also harbor doubts. It feels that repeating the same thing, purely conducting an assault would be pointless."

"Understood. If your emotions are not perturbed, it is meaningless."

"Yes. However, I must open that box no matter what, to obtain the Indulgence Disk. Even so, this is like dancing on Yamimagari Pakuaki's palm according to his tune, most displeasing. I am currently pondering how to activate the key as quickly as possible—"

"Specifics?"

Kotetsu could not find words to answer. Had she thought of a solution already, she would not be hiding in a dark spot, agonizing over the matter.

But at this moment, the person beside her smiled again.

"On the other hand, I have thought of two methods."

"If you don't mind, could you tell me what they are?"

"The first method comes from reverse thinking. In other words, you do not need to obsess over that key of yours that is almost activated. Conversely, you may simply forcibly activate someone else's key then take it for your own use."

"Precisely!" She expressed agreement. What a blind spot to overlook. But—

"Forcibly activated means...?"

"The keys detect emotions. You allowed your key to detect hatred. In that case, the keys are capable of sensing other negative emotions, of course. Take for example, despair, suffering, sadness, anguish and terror."

She recalled what Yamimagari Pakuaki had said. Unless the contractor died or the switch in the box was pressed, the keys would not reset. In other words—

So long as the contractors were not killed, no matter what was done to them, the keys were not going to reset.

Were there ways to make people feel despair and terror without killing them? Of course, more than one could count. Then the victim's key would activate and could be taken to open the box. Exceedingly simple.

Light chuckling was heard.

"The second method is related to your key. Simply attacking Muramasa is no longer sufficient to stir your feelings. Then in that case, go beyond 'simply.' Just allow yourself to witness more scenes that would invoke your

hatred, disappointment, even relief towards Muramasa. Such as, what would Muramasa think about listening to the screams of former enemies? Answers to these kinds of questions, for example."

This was a scheme that worked within the first scheme and both methods could be undertaken simultaneously. In other words, one could not lose no matter which option was chosen.

"Truth be told, I am completely impressed. As expected of a master."

"There is no benefit in offering praise to me. Since it is not yet time for me to make an appearance, I can only look forward to your performance."

"Yes, leave it to me."

The presence beside her vanished. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and secretly looked out from the shadows.

Those two were still chatting idly, talking about issues such as an exceeding budget or whether something was available for sale or not.

What a stroke of fortune. Were the target Fear-in-Cube or Muramasa, this method could not possibly succeed. Although the target seemed to be more agile than the average human, she was simply an ordinary human. At the same time, she was accompanied by that burden of a person.

Leaving the shadows where she had been hiding, she began to walk unhurriedly.

There was no reason for failure at all.

Part 3

Haruaki held his breath and concentrated, focusing his eyes on the scene before him.

The tiger-clawed attacks. Millimeter precision in visual judgment, evasion, attack, evasion. Repeated nonstop.

Kotetsu had appeared very suddenly without any warning at all, then started attacking. However, her attacks had not hurt Kururi. Despite possessing a knife, Kururi was unable to switch from defense to offense, but at least she was unharmed so far. No problem. She'll be fine. She'll surely find a way to repel the enemy here. So, during this time, maybe

someone might notice something amiss and hurry over—No, shouldn't I take this opportunity to go call Fear and the others now?

Confronted with the sudden assault, Haruaki's mind was plunged into chaos, but still he desperately racked his brain. At this moment—

"Truth be told, as a human, your vision is quite extraordinary. Nevertheless—"

"! Hey, hold on—!"

Suddenly, Kotetsu changed directions and stopped stepping towards Kururi.

She pretended to continue attacking Kururi but had actually changed her direction and target.

Or perhaps—She was attacking the target she had chosen from the start.

In other words, Haruaki himself.

"Eh?"

"Stop spacing out, freaking incompetent!"

The instant just as Kotetsu was closing in on him, Haruaki was shoved away forcefully by Kururi. Just before he fell on the ground, entering his view was—Using the arm that was originally thrust towards Haruaki, Kotetsu turned it towards Kururi in a very straightforward manner.

"No matter how good at seeing through an enemy's movements, the one making these moves is a human. Humans all have hearts. Wavering hearts are precisely the cause of failure!"

The impact of Haruaki's shoulder striking the ground prevented him from getting a clear view of Kotetsu and Kururi for a moment. But in the next second, he looked up in surprise, only to see—

Knocked out and limp all over, Kururi was already loaded onto Kotetsu's shoulder.

Kururi was not bleeding but her completely relaxed limbs were not moving at all. Had Kotetsu attacked Kururi's vitals with an attack without using a bladed move? Judging from the way Kotetsu had switched targets without hesitation, it was possible that she was aiming for Kururi all along. Haruaki was merely used by her as bait to create openings.

"H-Hey...! What are you trying to do with her!?"

"To perform a show. With that, even if the first plan fails, the second plan will still hasten the key's activation. In other words, a two-part gambit that suffers no loss no matter what. Truth be told, it is most impressive."

"What are... you talking about...!?"

Kotetsu then glanced towards the hotel. She could sense the interior of the building getting noisy. Footsteps also seemed to be approaching.

"Discovered? In any case, a change of location seems necessary."

Kotetsu looked back to glare extremely coldly at Haruaki. Then as though muttering, she continued:

"Where should I pick? A venue known to both your side and mine, suitable for a performance—Yes, speaking of performances, a 'Stage' comes to mind. I shall wait for you at the Stage. It is also a place you have visited today."

"Y-You mean Kiyomizu-dera...?"

"This is all I have to say. Pass the message along to them."

Still carrying the unconscious Kururi on her shoulder, Kotetsu took a leap and reached the top of the wall. Haruaki frantically stood up. The enemy was escaping. Kururi was being taken away. This absolutely could not be allowed. Clearly until just now, he had been talking to her, still discussing a very maidenly dilemma of what birthday present to give someone.

"W-Wait!"

"I shall not wait—One is not obliged to adhere to integrity when facing the weak. Men, warriors ought to be strong!"

Although Haruaki got a feeling that these words offered a clue to Kotetsu's true identity, he did not have the leisure to figure it out right now. He took a step forward, but by this time, the figures of Kotetsu and Kururi had already vanished from the top of the wall.

Haruaki clenched his fists but could only stare at the darkness where the two had disappeared.

She was right.

Haruaki cursed his own weakness.

Part 4

Kotetsu jumped from one railing to the next, finally landing on Kiyomizu-dera's stage. Naturally, there was no one around. Only the silent moonlight illuminated the stage.

Using a rope she had found along the way, Kotetsu bound the girl's hands behind her back then tied the rope to the railing. Finished with preparations, Kotetsu then pressed her palm against the girl's chest—

"...Hah!"

The impact penetrated the girl's body, rudely rousing her from unconsciousness. The girl coughed repeatedly while opening her eyes and coming to.

"Y-You bastard...!"

"This should need no explanation by this point, but I shall state for the record. You have become my prisoner."

"Screw that! Freaking incompetent, release me now!"

The girl struggled desperately in her bonds while glaring viciously at Kotetsu. What strength in character. Perhaps she simply does not understand her situation—but soon, she was going to understand, whether she wanted to or not.

"Impossible. You must first fulfill your mission."

"Mission...?"

"Indeed. Where is the key?"

Caution was imperative for the next step. Hence, the key must be placed somewhere visible so that its state could be confirmed regularly during the operation. Kotetsu carelessly searched the girl's clothing.

"Fool... Hey, stop touching me randomly! Freaking incompetent, I'm gonna kill you!"

"Stop speaking of things beyond your ability. Hmm, found it."

Kotetsu discovered the key in the girl's breast pocket. Since all it mattered was the key being visible, Kotetsu casually tossed it by her feet. Roughly 65% red, the key hit the floor with a clang.

"What are you doing? That's my key...!"

"I know. That is why I intend to activate your key."

"Huh?"

"Yes." Kotetsu nodded, then—merely as an afterthought—reached into the girl's emptied breast pocket and ripped her clothing with full force all at once. As a result of this impact, even her underwear came undone. But this was of no consequence, for Kotetsu was uninterested in a female breasts.

"Wha...!? What are you trying to do? I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna kill you, incompetent bastard!"

The girl was struggling more intensely than before. This was only natural, this was the only way.

"—Here lies your key. Contracted to you, it senses your emotions. As long as you are not dead, it will continue sensing. Sensing your despair, suffering and hatred!"

"...You bastard, no way, for the sake of activating my key, you took me here to... Yaaaaaaaarrggggghhhhhh!"

The girl finally seemed to understand, displaying great alarm on her face. At the same time, Kotetsu grabbed her exposed shoulder and imbued an index finger with a sword's traits, stabbing it into her flesh.

The girl's body twisted in pain. Hanging on her body, the tattered clothing slid down, exposing more of her pale flesh where a red liquid was beginning to drip down. Kotetsu then pierced with a middle finger to create a second river of blood.

"Huff... Ah... Ah... Incompetent... Freaking incompetent... Who wants... to be used by a bastard like you! I won't think anything, won't feel anything, won't give any power to the key! Ahhh, so sleepy, I will enter deep slumber in the vast empty realm of nirvana, bastard...!"

"Impossible. No matter how strong their will, the type of creature called humans are not that resistant to pain. Besides—"

While speaking, Kotetsu drew nearer to the girl, bringing her face up close to smell the odor of blood, flowing across the girl's pale skin and between her breasts. Brightly colored and seductive, the blood was stimulating Kotetsu's appetite.

Then—

She extended her tongue to lick.

"What!?"

"Mmm—S-Slurp... Smooch..."

Sipping, licking, drawn between her lips, nibbling, accumulating within her cheeks, swallowing. How delicious. The blood formed a small puddle over the navel. What a shame. Kotetsu puckered her lips to suck and drink. Delicious, truly too delicious!

The excitement was quickening Kotetsu's breathing. Moving her lips slightly away, she said:

"H-Haha—There is no need to be surprised. This is my 'curse.' Tonight, Kotetsu happens to thirst for blood—Fufufu, Isami-sama's famous words were probably preserved for posterity, yes? Indeed, I currently thirst for fresh blood! Truth be told, it is truly a simple and ugly curse as befitting a Japanese sword! Ever since coming to this place, I have been drinking blood every day, but taking care all this time to avoid causing a major incident, making sure that the victims all look like they were simply suffering from anemia or heat stroke! However, fufu, I have been suppressing myself, especially today! Because I saw Muramasa's blood! I wonder what her blood tastes like! Although tasting it is currently impossible, I shall use your fresh blood as a substitute for now!"

Slurp... slurp, Kotetsu sipped and drank, following the river of blood upstream. Her nose felt the sensation of soft and tender skin.

"Ahhh, stop it... Stop it now, freaking incompetent...!"

"This curse is also one of the elements in activating your key. Do you find it disgusting? Are you afraid? Will you curse? Curse as much as you want. I shall feel pleasure from satisfying my curse. Perhaps you might feel pleasure too. That is fine too, feel pleasure for all you want. Because these are all feelings, a type of feeling—"

Feeling her back tremble, Kotetsu brought their bodies even closer together, licking and sucking the blood flowing across the girl's skin, the blood sliding over her soft bulges, the blood wrapping itself around the sensitive protrusions. Since Kotetsu was currently akin to clamping the girl's body between her legs, she could clearly feel every tremble of the girl's body. Probably noticing something, the girl was staring down at Kotetsu with fearful eyes that eluded description.

"A-Ahhh! You bastard...! No... way...!"

"I want even more. More fright, more terror. Not only anger but I also refuse to let you forget suffering and despair. Curse, go on and curse now—!"

"Nnnygiaagaha!?"

Kotetsu's tongue finally traced the blood all the way back to the source, hence she poked her tongue into the shoulder wounds to explore, drinking fresh blood directly. At the same time, she used her middle finger to stab a third hole next to the other two. Thinking it seemed a bit unfair to concentrate all the pain on the left shoulder, Kotetsu took this opportunity to use her fingertip to slice open the right upper arm, creating a cute little fissure. Then she used her tongue to lick that wound to her heart's content.

"Yee... A-Ahhhhhhh! Guh! Stop it... Stop it now... Ahhhhhhhh!"

Kotetsu pressed the weight of her burning body on the girl, satisfying her curse. Then she took a glance at the key she had thrown on the floor. 80%... Roughly three minutes had passed? The increased speed was truly rapid indeed. After all, this girl was no saint to begin with, hence maintaining presence of mind in spite of such treatment was impossible.

However, issues still existed. Although Kotetsu was very careful, it was still possible for the girl to go into shock and die on her own. If that happened, everything would be back to square one. Even without entering shock and dying, once the girl fell unconscious due to blood loss, the emotional volume would also cease to rise. Hence, this ideal situation could not persist indefinitely.

Consequently, the second plan was needed. Simply abducting the girl to this deserted place was not enough.

Of course, it was also possible for good fortune to be stacked upon good fortune, resulting in the key's activation just with this.

But to be honest, Kotetsu was hoping for a different result.

Secretly, she asked in her mind:

(Will you come? Muramasa...)

Then she imagined the taste of Muramasa's blood.

...As though pleasuring oneself, Kotetsu drank the girl's blood as a substitute.

Part 5

Haruaki and company sneaked out of the hotel then took a taxi to their destination. After arriving, they ran as quickly as they could.

"Hey Fear! There should be guards here, right!?"

"We'll just have to find a way to fool them if there are. But perhaps, that girl already handled this issue."

With Fear and the others' help, Haruaki climbed over the main gate and fencing to continue advancing. Coming along for the sake of her mission, Un Izoey simply jumped over the obstacle as though it were ordinary ground. The whole group was clearly trespassing illegally but there was no spare effort to dwell on this matter.

Fortunately—or maybe just as Fear had suggested, Kotetsu had took care of them already—they did not encounter any guards along the way. The group rushed past Kiyomizu-dera's central gate and finally saw the main hall.

Then they spotted figures on Kiyomizu Stage.

"Is... that it...!?"

They rushed forward over the wooden floorboards. Then illuminated under the moonlight—

An exceedingly tragic and unusual scene came into view.

"You have arrived."

"Urgh... Ah—"

Kururi was tied to the railing in the very center, groaning. Her clothing was ripped, putting her in half-naked state. Her entire body was covered with wounds and dark-red bloodstains could be seen all over—though not to the point that she would be described as covered in blood. The volume of blood itself was not great but this halfway condition was even more creepy and terrifying to behold.

Kotetsu had climbed on top of Kururi's body, drinking her fresh blood.

"Although there is almost there, this is still not enough to reach completion?"

She glanced at the key on the floor then left Kururi, turning to face the new arrivals while wiping her lips clean.

"You... fiend...!"

Fear gripped the Rubik's cube tightly, instantly turning it into a drill. Just as she was about to charge ahead directly—

"—Wrath, hatred, in other words, curses. You too, have been using these emotions to gradually activate the key, haven't you? Otherwise, go ahead and check your key. No matter how you think about it, this is the easier way. I have simply done the same as you. There is no justification for me to suffer your reprimand."

"...!"

Fear stopped on the spot after taking merely one step. Kirika maintained a posture that could extend the «Tragic Black River» any time, but did not move closer, simply glaring at Kotetsu while her eyes were burning with rage.

They were probably cautious in consideration of the fact that Kotetsu was still in a position to do whatever she wanted to Kururi.

Haruaki's mind was occupied with only one matter. What he ought to be doing.

"Are you saying that reprimanding you is unjustified? What an audacious statement."

"Muramasa..."

Konoha spoke in an extremely calm tone of voice. Haruaki knew this to be Konoha's voice whenever she was truly angry. As though trying to see more clearly, Kotetsu faced Konoha's gaze head on and narrowed her eyes.

"Do you know what you are doing right now? The word 'integrity' must surely be weeping."

"...Go on a little more, Muramasa."

"To think you would drink flesh blood from an immobile girl, trying to reach your goal by relying on her power. Absolutely no restraint in taking advantage of others. This is not behavior befitting a proud sword."

"A sword exists to slay enemies. Are you implying that this type of behavior doesn't count?"

"Indeed, it does not. Perhaps she can be considered an enemy to you who also possess a key, but you have gone too far. Indeed, your actions have truly gone too far."

Kotetsu took a deep breath and asked as though to confirm:

"...You are angered?"

"Yes, of course. You only noticed now?"

Knife hand readied, Konoha took a step forward, but Kotetsu did not enter a combat stance. Instead, she took out something from her pocket—most likely her key—then gripped it tightly.

Her gaze was still locked on Konoha while her throat trembled as though in trepidation.

"I shall ask once more, are you truly angered? Truthfully from the bottom of your heart, Muramasa? Is your entire body currently burning with the wrath of justice!?"

"I don't care about justice here! But indeed, I am furious from the bottom of my heart!"

Kotetsu shook her hair then continued in a voice that carried something resembling impatience:

"—I know that this girl is your past enemy! Even so, will you still anger for the sake of a girl who used to be an enemy!?"

"You sure talk excessively at length. I've already forgotten that kind of thing ages ago!"

This answer seemed to be precisely some kind of turning point.

Kotetsu stopped moving and stared wide-eyed.

Shocked.

Dazed.

Then—

"Ahhh, ahhhhhhh—Muramasa, Muramasa—! This is wrong, wrong, absolutely wrong!"

Kotetsu pulled at her own hair, her body swaying unsteadily, countless emotions clouding her eyes as she howled and yelled hysterically.

Then she reached out as though suddenly remembering, grabbing the arm of the limp Kururi. Her hand in a tiger-clawed strike, each of her fingers buried themselves into the arm. New, fresh blood. Kururi's new screams. At this moment, presumably exceeding the limit of her endurance, Kururi's screaming was unnaturally cut off as her head fell to the side. She had fainted completely.

"How now!? How now!? How is this!?"

"S-Stop it now!"

"This cannot be... This cannot be! Muramasa is not supposed to be like this! We are the swords of swords! Unique and absolute, veritable swords of slaughter! We should be sneering and derisive, we should be cold-blooded and merciless, we should be the masters of cruelty and violence! This... Muramasa, to think you have forgotten the fact of a former enemy and going as far as to forgive her, even getting angered for the sake of someone like this—Impossible... This is impossible!"

Like the tantrums of a willful child, these screams expressed emotions directly without disguise. Presumably taken aback, Konoha frowned slightly and said:

"Y-Your words are far too presumptuous. I am myself!"

"As much as I refuse to confirm, I have no choice but to confirm! Too useless! Ahhh, Muramasa turns out to be far far far far far far more useless

than I ever imagined! So! Indeed, ahhh, I am overcome with disappointment, despair, resignation, anger, scorn, contempt, hatred, which is why there is hope in my heart! A curse, truth be told, this is a curse, Muramasaaaaaaaaa—!"

With exceptional intensity, Kotetsu yelled out a selfish explanation that Haruaki and company could not understand. Then as though a certain wire snapped, her voice suddenly stopped.

Soon after—

Kotetsu slowly straightened her back then extended her right hand lightly forward. This was the right hand she had been clenching firmly. Blood could be seen dripping down from her palm. Did she grip the key too hard, producing a piercing wound on her palm? No, that was not right—

"...I already understand now. I had originally been harboring vague notions that it would be acceptable to allow the current situation to continue before thinking up countermeasures, because I cannot neglect the possibility of risk coming to a certain esteemed one. However, circumstances will not permit me to adhere to that plan. I understand now. I must do this. By this point in time, there is only one thing that I ought to do which is completely correct."

Kotetsu spoke quietly and emphatically, making her earlier outburst of emotion seem like an illusion. The content of her words was still incomprehensible.

Kotetsu's gaze was so cold that it caused the viewer to tremble. Slowly, she opened her palm.

On top of that palm was—

Bright red in color, it was a key whose surface dripped with fresh blood.

"What...!? Y-You have already finished accumulating...!"

"See it and understand, Fear-in-Cube. This is my key. Haha, let me have a lick. Tasting like water, it only resembles blood in appearance? Haha."

Kotetsu reached out with her tongue to lick the key, meanwhile laughing dryly in a hollow manner. Then she cast her gaze towards the back of Fear's group.

"Come, girl of the Lab Chief's Nation. My key is already activated. You brought the box, yes? Let me open it."

"...Affirmative. My answer: due to the Lab Chief's orders, I agree reluctantly..."

Un Izoey took out the box from her pocket and was about to walk towards Kotetsu. However, Fear and company were not going to simply watch without doing anything, of course.

"Yeah right! Even if your key is activated, it's not over yet. All we need to do is defeat you right here!"

"Indeed, you have truly done a great deal of absolutely ridiculous things... We can't possibly let you open the box so easily. Not on our watch."

"Going on and on about your presumptuous logic, do you really believe you'll be able to leave safely with your souvenir?"

"No."

Fear and company instantly entered battle stances, but Kotetsu remained calm and composed as though she had expected this.

"That is why I shall do this."

Using her finger, Kotetsu lightly severed the rope binding Kururi to the railing.

Then mustering the absolute limit of inhuman brute force, she lifted up Kururi's body like luggage.

Then higher, even higher, she tossed Kururi out, putting her on course to fall off Kiyomizu Stage.

In that very instant—

Springing into action faster than anyone else—

Haruaki sprinted straight forward.

(I must... make it—!)

He had been searching for an opportunity all this time. His mind was completely filled with thoughts that he must rescue Kururi who was abducted only because he was too weak. Apart from that, he did not think

about anything else, unlike Fear and the girls who harbored notions of defeating Kotetsu or protecting Haruaki in the corners of their minds.

Hence, he was able to react immediately.

Run faster, run faster, Haruaki ran as fast as he could while focusing his attention on Kururi who was flying out in a parabolic trajectory. By this point, he recalled what Kotetsu had said. A former enemy? Who cares. She's just an ordinary restaurant server now. Just an ordinary girl with a bit of a sharp tongue, the smell of soup on her hands, a gruff personality and who was in love with someone. What was wrong with saving her?

(I'm to blame... It's all my fault for being too much of a hindrance, that's why she got abducted! That's why... I have to take some responsibility at least...!)

Kotetsu had thrown Kururi off the center of the stage. The girl's body was following an extremely high parabola. Naturally, the end point was not on the stage floor. Dash. After reaching the maximum height, the girl's body began to descend. Dash. Haruaki stepped on the railing. He did not even think about what lay in front of him or what might happen next.

A sense of floating. At the very last moment, his extended arms caught the girl's blood-covered arm. Had he started sprinting a second later or kept his eyes on someone apart from Kururi, Haruaki definitely would not have made it in time.

Haruaki mustered all his strength to pull her arm then held Kururi's body in his arms. At the same time, the floating feeling enveloping his body turned into an irresistible sense of falling. The darkness extending before his eyes was beckoning to him.

By this point, there was nothing Haruaki could do.

All he could recall was the description he had read in the guide booklet during the visit in the daytime.

(I remember... The survival rate is 85%, right?)

Surely it was less than 85% since the fall was far too dangerous for the unconscious Kururi. Hence, Haruaki's only choice was to save her—But then, what was the survival rate for two people falling together? Haruaki really hoped that it was the same as the number quoted just now, then repeated his remark that it was unexpectedly high. He did not want to die

but getting injured was acceptable. Provided that Kururi remained safe, his responsibility would—

"Even if just a little bit! Reach out with your hand, Yachi—!"

He heard a voice that sounded like an angry roar and a mournful wail. Unable to determine his orientation, Haruaki reflexively reached out with one arm, then something wrapped itself around his arm—It was the «Tragic Black River».

"Gah... Ah!"

A wave of intense pain and impact struck his arm which acted as the point of support. Perhaps his shoulder might have been dislocated. Haruaki used his other arm to hug Kururi's body desperately. Although his rate of descent had slowed, the «Tragic Black River» wrapped around his arm was unable to absorb all of the kinetic energy. No longer undergoing free fall, Haruaki and Kururi were then pulled closer to the stage. With a crash, his body struck the underlying framework. Ouch. However, he still did not loosen his grip on Kururi. Then in the next second, the pain on his back suddenly disappeared.

Replacing it was warmth.

(...Ah.)

Konoha and Fear were hugging them tightly from both sides. Due to «Tragic» slowing Haruaki and Kururi's descent, Konoha and Fear were able to catch up after jumping a moment later. Where on their bodies was this warmth coming from? Protected by the two girls, they continued to fall. After striking the framework, the direction of descent was tilted to the side. Sharp tree branches could be seen below. Fear and Konoha were not aware. Just as Haruaki shuddered, a certain brown entity flashed before his eyes, slicing the branches. Immediately, the brown, unidentified entity kicked at tree trunks, using monkey-like physical skills to reduce falling momentum.

Then—

"Uwah! O-Ohhh!"

Crash! They all landed at the same time. Of course, Haruaki did not touch the ground directly. It was Fear and Konoha, hugging Haruaki and Kururi between them, who first stepped on the ground, taking on the impact.

Haruaki looked up at the night sky, only to see Kirika leaning forward from the railing on the stage. The expression of her face turned from unprecedented panic and loss of composure into massive relief. Kirika first released Haruaki's arm from the «Tragic Black River» and withdrew the belt, then she quickly used it as a rope to lower herself down to their location.

Haruaki looked at Kururi, held in his arms. She was covered with wounds, bleeding, unconscious. However—her chest was definitely heaving up and down in a steady rhythm.

"Thank goodness... She's still alive..."

"What's so good about that—!? Are you an idiot!? A real idiot!? I'll curse you!"

"Please stop playing jokes, Haruaki-kun! I will truly get angry!"

"Absolutely ridiculous! I'll say this as many times as it takes, truly and absolutely ridiculous! Furthermore, it's ridiculous to an unprecedented extent!"

"I agree: giving comment of there should be limits to recklessness..."

Un Izoey simply sighed while looking at Haruaki but Fear and the other girls' rampant anger was quite astounding. They looked like they were almost about to rush over and grab him by the collar.

"No... Uh, because all I could think about was saving her... Sorry for worrying you all, I apologize. But you see, if I hadn't grabbed Kururi first then reached out, Class Rep's belt might not have been in time, so the result is that we're saved—Owwwww!"

It's fine, it's fine—Haruaki felt intense pain simply from turning his arm, even breaking out in cold sweat. This looked like he might very well have a fracture.

"I-Is it the spot where I wrapped «Tragic» around? Sorry, if only I had controlled it more skillfully..."

"Sigh... This can't be helped either. After all, the situation was so dire, consider it a necessary but small sacrifice. Luckily, it's just this level of minor injury. Class Rep, everyone... Thank you all. It's thanks to you all that I was saved."

"You call this... lucky and just... a minor injury?"

Konoha was exuding a chilling aura that made one shudder. Looking at Haruaki's arm, she narrowed her eyes.

In her current state, she looked like she was at her limit no matter what.

"I will not let the one responsible for harming Haruaki-kun go scot-free, I will absolutely not forgive her...!"

At this moment, Konoha suddenly seemed to realize something and took out the key from her pocket.

Due to her terrifying and astounding wrath...

The key had already turned crimson.

"To think it even drips blood, how truly nauseating. But I shall endure for now. Until this little girl who has gone astray is punished!"

Konoha gripped the key tightly, looking up at the stage as she spoke softly.

Fear was also staring at Haruaki's arm. Kururi, all covered with wounds, was also within her view.

She could feel an extremely black and dark type of emotion spilling out from her heart.

How dare she... How dare she... How dare she how dare she how dare she!

The Rubik's cube seemed to be creaking, urging her to hurry and transform it back into a tool of torture. Her own body seemed to be creaking, hoping she would hand out violence to the unforgivable target. She wanted badly to hear screams. Go on and scream out with resentment loudly. I will make you taste retribution, come beg me for mercy!

But at this moment, Fear realized suddenly and also took out her key from her pocket. Over 90%, a little bit more and the key was going to activate.

But was this okay?

A question surfaced in her mind again.

No.

She did not want to activate the key using such dark inner thoughts, using these curse-like feelings.

It would be tantamount to saying that negative emotions suited her more, that these dark, horrifying and ugly thoughts were the emotions that she ought to be close to.

Fear gripped her fist, holding the key firmly and closing her eyes tightly. But at this moment—

She felt a warm feeling from her tightly clenched fist.

"What's wrong...? Why are you making an expression like you're about to cry?"

"Ah..."

"If anything, I should be the one who wants to cry. Uh, of course, I'm not gonna cry. Yeah, since I won't cry, then you don't need to make such a sad look... Haha, don't grip so hard, you can relax a bit more. Don't be so somber in mood, relax relax relax. Anyway, Kururi and I are safe and sound now."

Sitting on the ground, Haruaki used the hand that still had freedom of movement, gently covering Fear's fist then patting lightly. His fingertips touched the back of her hand gently.

Despite the current circumstances, he was still able to show his usual smile. Wrapped around her fist, his palm was very warm. His words were also very warm.

—Now this is the correct side, Fear thought.

This side was the direction where she ought to move towards.

Currently, cursing feelings were mixed into her heart. These emotions were driving the key's activation.

However, she did not want to use these feelings as the final driving force. Because she felt that if that happened, the result would symbolize how she was this dark, that she was unable to escape this sort of destiny even to the last second.

She wanted proof to the contrary.

She wanted proof that she was not only constituted from curses.

Hence—

"Woah, Fear!"

She reached out and hugged Haruaki's neck while he was sitting on the ground. She could sense Konoha and Kirika greatly surprised, but she did not care.

Not a curse, not negative emotions.

She wanted proof that other emotions definitely existed in her heart.

"Watching the scene of you falling down just now, in my mind—There was purely just one thought."

Fear drew near to Haruaki's ear and whispered only loud enough for him to hear. "Fear...?" Haruaki whispered back in puzzlement. On her own, she continued speaking:

"..I was thinking that this heart, born from a tool of torture, was about to stop beating. In other words, me—that's right—my only thought was that I didn't want to lose you. I've always thought so. Just this one fact, just this feeling is undeniable. No matter what happens, no matter what kind of existence I am, just this one fact...!"

Fear seemed to hear exhalation by her ear akin to a sigh. Then she felt Haruaki use his movable arm to pat her back gently, very gently.

An type of extremely warm feeling was spreading out from the depths of her heart. A kind of wet feeling was coming from her palm.

She took a glance and discovered that the key's color was—crimson.

Throb, all the blood in her body jumped greatly with warmth.

Look!

They're real. I have them too.

I definitely have emotions apart from curses!

"Yeah!"

"Urghh... I-I can't breathe! Not only my arm but also my neck is getting severely injured!"

"H-Hmph! This is punishment for ignoring your own safety and even doing something so stupid. This is the scarf hold that the teacher taught us. It's painful, right? After I teach a lesson with this move, I'll let you off for now. Because I still have things to do next!"

Fear released Haruaki's neck and stood up.

Her heart was filled with reasons to fight.

Not hatred but the burning anger of justice.

"My question... I am quite puzzled by my own behavior. Why did I go so far as to drop the box and rush down in a hurry...? No answer no matter how hard I try to think. Truly unknown."

Un Izoey was muttering with her head tilted. Perhaps we owe this girl another favor—Fear thought to herself and said:

"You left the box up there? Then we must act quick. Kirika, I'm leaving the rest to you."

"Yeah... Sure."

Next, Fear and Konoha looked at each other. No words required, they understood what they were both supposed to do respectively.

Nodding silently as a signal, they both jumped simultaneously.

Landing on the framework and using it as a stepping board, they continued to jump up. Repeating this nonstop, they gradually rose up, in order to return to the stage where the battle was going to be decided.

Part 6

"Things end here now!"

Just about to reach towards the box lid, Kotetsu slowly looked back, a strange frown on her face. Had they managed to make it in time at the last second?

By this point, there was nothing left to be said.

"Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern»!"

"Prepare yourself!"

Fear and Konoha charged the enemy at the same time. Kotetsu ducked under the metal club while using a tiger-clawed strike to deflect Konoha's karate chop, then took a leap to distance herself from the box. Glaring at the two girls, she entered a battle stance.

"Even though I have something to say, will you not listen?"

"Rubbish! On the other hand, I might consider it after I turn you into a rag!"

"In that case, a fight is unavoidable. Go forth and pierce, my will!"

Kotetsu reached behind her and picked up an exhibit that was displayed on the side of the stage.

These were reputedly the Khakkhara staves that the warrior monk Benkei had used in the past. The staves were supposed to be too heavy for ordinary humans to lift with ease, but possessing inhuman arm strength, Kotetsu picked up the whole exhibit effortlessly. Grabbing the two staves, one long and one short, which were kept inside a wooden rack, Kotetsu quickly extended her tongue to lick.

After doing that, these staves could now be described as two Khakkara blades. Holding the large staff underarm while wielding the small Khakkara in one hand, Kotetsu attacked using a dual-wielding style. Truly bold swordsmanship. It was a fierce offensive that attempted to overwhelm all opposition using power and speed.

The large Khakkhara was like a main cannon, armed with both mass and sharpness, intimidating and vigorous like a battering ram. Each forceful swing was able to twist the air and tear people apart. A human would surely die from one hit. A single swing could probably chop five or six people to death. Fear swung her metal club with full force, barely managing to deflect the staff on equal terms. Both hands felt numb after each impact.

On the other hand, the small Khakkara blade was an all-purpose weapon possessing both speed and sharpness. Kotetsu had an excellent grasp of balance, exhibiting speed and accuracy that was difficult to imagine coming from one-handed wielding. The sound of air being sliced could be heard. It went without saying for slashes, but even her thrusts were exceptionally fast. Thrusts that came flying without preparatory motion were almost like short-range gunshots. Fatal gunshots with infinite ammunition. Konoha was unable to block all the attacks, neither could she

evade them all completely. The Khakkara blade brushed past her shoulders, cheeks, waist, arms and legs, producing tiny spatters of blood.

"I have no business with you anymore! Not interested either! Get out of the way!"

"Even if you don't—"

"We have a great interest in you, however."

Never faltering, continuing to fight. Just at this moment, in the corner of her eye, Fear saw Kirika carrying Haruaki on her back back to the stage. She was probably using «Tragic» to wrap around the railing and pull them up. After confirming that the spot was safe from getting swept up in battle, the two of them climbed over the railing to set foot on the stage again. Moments later, Un Izoey also returned to the stage while carrying Kururi in her arms.

The audience had increased. Fear recalled their reasons for fighting.

Kotetsu was very strong, exhibiting valor akin to the peerless Benkei.^[13]

Nevertheless, nevertheless—

Fear and Konoha were displaying identical expressions.

"Cow Tits, are you going to lose?"

"Impossible."

Both were smiling fearlessly.

After confirming each other's smiles, they both sprang into action, trying to outdo the other. Fear allowed herself to employ powers that she had not released all this time.

She had things she ought to do, things she must do.

If these things were founded upon the burning anger of righteous justice...

Surely—She was not going to be devoured so easily.

Perhaps this was only her own presumption. Nevertheless, once she believed it, being able to bring out firm resolve was a fact of truth. She vowed to the burning-hot emotions in her heart that were gradually becoming clear, this was a fact of truth. She was able to assert thus.

Hence, Fear took out the second Rubik's cube.

"Dual Emulation, start! Mechanism No.4 swinging type, oscillatory form: «The Pendulum»—also, Mechanism No.15 suspended type, caged form: «Highwayman's Coffin», Curse Calling!"

Fear turned the cube in her right hand into a massive pendulum scythe attached to a long chain. At the same time, she conferred another cruel form to the cube on her left hand. It was a torture instrument consisting of a metal enclosure resembling a birdcage with a long chain in front. The birdcage was entirely hollow on the bottom and was either used by suspending the cage up high or placing a bed of nails beneath. Imprisoned in the cage, the victims would ultimately fall to their deaths once their strength was exhausted. Even if they managed to entwine their limbs on the metal cage's bars, the prisoners would ultimately weaken and die from exposure—This was a type of public execution meant as a long-term spectacle in the first place. Nevertheless, Fear did not have the leisure to do things that way. Swinging the long chain, she threw out the heavy steel cage in a violent manner—Under such conditions, it was equivalent to a long-range bludgeoning weapon, an impromptu weight on a chain.

Swinging the visually similar «Highwayman's Coffin» and «The Pendulum», two chain-type weapons, Fear swept them horizontally at the same time. The reason why she did not transform both cubes to the same form was because "similar but different" was quite advantageous. Attack range, shape of the swinging mass, weight, speed variation, center of gravity—This simply doubled the amount of information that needed to be discerned within an instant. Calculating everything would be a tall order indeed.



The two chains wrapped themselves around the large Khakkara blade that Kotetsu had lifted up for defense. Rotating irregularly, the weighted ends of the chains traced out curved trajectories using the large Khakkara blade as a pivot, flying to attack Kotetsu. Although unable to produce critical injuries, the birdcage struck Kotetsu's arm hard while the execution pendulum slashed across her waist. A single tool might not have been enough, but right now, the mass of torture tools had doubled. Entangling the large Khakkara blade, the chains completely sealed its movement. Kill her, kill her, kill her viciously. A voice whispered in the depths of Fear's heart. "So annoying, shut up." Fear suppressed it.

Charging Kotetsu from the opposite direction, Konoha engaged the flashing, small Khakkara blade.

"I am currently filled with fighting spirit—Haven't you noticed? Although there are cuts all over my body, the blade of my hand is different from last time. I have not suffered any slicing damage again from the Kotetsu you created."

"—?"

Indeed, Konoha's knife hand was not bleeding a single drop of blood. She had not lost to Kotetsu in a contest of slicing.

Konoha stepped forward and used her right knife hand to block the small Khakkara blade before shoving with the base of her right palm. She proceeded to close in, using her right hand to grab the front end of the small Khakkara blade.

"Our powers are quite reliant on willpower. Even considering the same samurai wielding the same sword, the trajectory of the sword's swing will probably be different when chopping down an enemy for a long-time blood feud compared to cutting down women and children while disguised as a bandit. Indeed, right now I am—"

Holding the small Khakkara blade to immobilize it, Konoha swung her left elbow to chop downwards while kicking her left knee to smash upwards.

Caught in between, the Khakkara staff made an ear-splitting metallic noise while turning into countless smithereens. Shredded, shredded, utterly shredded.

Then with smooth flowing motions, Konoha closed in on Kotetsu herself. Since the large Khakkara blade on her right was already sealed completely

by Fear's giant pendulum scythe, Kotetsu was out of options. Since Konoha had been targeted and picked on by the enemy all this time and accumulated a lot of stress, Fear decided to concede matters to her. No helping it.

Konoha's eyes narrowed acutely. The corners of her lips curled. Her exhaled breath was like poisonous gas.

"Presently, I absolutely cannot tolerate such an abundance of folly. Whether thy master's folly or thy own. Ah, truly excessive stupidity, O Nagasone Kotetsu Nyuudou Okisato—To dare stir me to anger, this crime alone is sufficient to condemn thee to be a third-rate and ordinary blade! Know thy place!"

"A-Ahhhhh...!"

In that instant, Kotetsu's face seemed to twist in a bizarre manner, her expression a complicated mixture of all sorts of elements. Terror and fear, trepidation and surprise, shock and reverence, as well as—relief and joy.

Fear did not want to know what this meant. Konoha did not think there was any need to know.

In the next instant, Konoha's spear-handed strike was buried deep into Kotetsu's abdomen.

Watching this result, Haruaki temporarily forgot the pangs of numbing pain on his arm.

Kotetsu flew back towards the far end of the stage, breathing quickly while resting her back against the railing. With her hand pressed against her abdomen, fresh red blood was seeping out from beneath.

Probably due to seeing that color, a certain feeling that ought to be suppressed was surging forth from the depths within her, Konoha narrowed her eyes as though enduring painfully and said:

"I have already held back. You have also reduced the damage slightly by jumping backwards. But after suffering this type of wound, continuing to fight is probably beyond you."

"Ha... Ha... Ha... Haha... Hahaha..."

Kotetsu laughed out as though stunned and at a loss for words.

"Muramasa... To think that until the very last moment... However, it is meaningless. Completely meaningless..."

Leaning on the railing, Kotetsu straightened her back. Then ceasing her laughter, she swept her gaze across the group.

Then she spoke up.

Expressionless, she simply used a calm tone of voice as though recounting facts.

Her words were unbelievable:

"Let me tell you. I already opened the box, but I did not obtain the Indulgence Disk. Do you know what this means? In other words, me, you, everyone has been played for a fool."

"What are... you saying...?"

It was unclear whether Haruaki and company's question reached Kotetsu's ears.

But in any case, she was not going to answer.

Because at this moment, Kotetsu leaned her weight backwards. With her back against the railing, she performed a back flip and fell down from the stage.

Due to the excessively shocking nature of Kotetsu's statement, it took a moment's delay before anyone sprang into action. Regaining her senses, Konoha ran towards the railing and looked down, but in the end, she simply shook her head. "...She escaped."

"How could... this be possible?"

Fear murmured quietly then plopped herself down on the floor in front of the box, taking the crimson key out from her pocket. Haruaki and the rest also walked over to her back.

Then Fear inserted the key into the keyhole and turned, producing a light, pleasant and crisp sound.

The box opened.

The contents were displayed clearly before their eyes.

—Completely empty.

Their brains refused to understand.

What did this sight represent? Why did they witness such a sight? Or rather... Why did they not see the Indulgence Disk they had been seeking all this time?

"W-What is going on here!? Absolutely ridiculous! The keyhole was definitely locked!"

"The keys can only be reset by pressing a switch inside the box—In other words, this box's design might be the type where even if someone opened it, the box locks up after being closed again, like an automatic lock. In other words, the scene we witnessed earlier was not the instant when she was about to open the box... Instead, it was the instant of closing...!"

"Th-Then... Could that girl be lying so she actually took the Disk before escaping?"

"No, I don't think she is a girl who is capable of lying smoothly under those conditions."

Gazing at that emptiness from the nearest distance, Fear probably suffered the greatest shock of all, nevertheless, she spoke in a calm tone of voice.

Haruaki had no choice but to agree. But what actually happened?

Supposing Kotetsu's final words were true.

Supposing she had not obtained the Indulgence Disk either—

Then the Indulgence Disk that everyone had been looking for, that Kotetsu had been looking for, what could be described as the root cause of the whole incident—

Where on earth was it now?

"This development is really unexpected. My confession: reporting the Lab Chief left a letter in my safekeeping. Lab Chief's orders: wait until you open the box then hand letter to you once everything is over. About the content, I report the truth that it is unknown to me too."

With an apologetic expression, Un Izoey used her foot to draw out an envelope from under her skirt. Fear snatched it, spread out the letter folded

inside the envelope, then started reading it under the moonlight. Naturally, Haruaki and the others craned their necks to have a look as well.

'Hi, I was thinking you all might be mistaken, so let me clarify first. I only said that keys whose power has activated will be able to open this box, but I never said anything about be able to obtain the Indulgence Disk kept inside the box. You should have been more skeptical back then and asked me "Did you really put the Indulgence Disk into the box?" After all, I do know one or two little clever tricks that magicians use. If you need an analogy, my pocket is big enough to do all sorts of bad things.'

Absolutely unbelievable. That man was truly the worst. Fear continued to read.

'No no no, I hope you won't be angry. Thanks to those keys, I'm thinking that you must have created wonderful memories during the school excursion, am I right? I'm just trying to help you guys. Of course, it's also because it provides entertainment to me as a spectator. That said, from your standpoint, it really would be excessively tragic to be treated as an entertainment show without consent but still not receiving the agreed prize. I did consider this seriously, you know? As a thank you gift for providing me with so much fun as a spectator, I guarantee personally that Hinai Elsie will be returned unconditionally. Although I'm not sure if they are currently present, if they're not, then please help pass the message along to the members of the Family.'

Long-winded and insufferable. Just like the times when he spoke in person, the letter was so long that it was infuriating.

'Basically, in other words, this whole affair can be explained simply as—Using the Indulgence Disk as the price, the Family has secured the release of Hinai Elsie from the Lab Chief's Nation in exchange. Simplifying problems is very important. Although Indulgence Disks are almost worthless to us, from our standpoint, Hinai Elsie is equally worthless to us too, so this exchange can be considered a fair deal. Suppose that girl from the Family took the Indulgence Disk or your side obtained it directly, you would have accepted the Family's request to serve as a go-between for negotiations, right? If that happened, I would have no choice but to reconsider the price in front of my subordinates, a price that is "appropriately worthless," which the Family ought to pay in exchange for Hinai Elsie's release, then ask the Family to pay it. I think that would really be quite bothersome. As much as I'm sorry about how much you desired the Indulgence Disk, seeing as I've provided you with heart-pounding

blush-worthy joy and the message that you must be loyal to your feelings in the school excursion, I hope you'll let things slide—'

Reading to this point was the limit.

"Screw... this—!"

Uttering these words on everyone's behalf, Fear threw the letter down onto the floor.

Everyone was glaring at the letter with eyes of anger and hatred. Fear really felt like grinding it to a pulp beneath her foot then burning it up, but doing so was not going to help.

Even as his personal aide, Un Izoey was staring with narrowed eyes displaying the same gaze, bowing her head as she looked at the letter with the utterly despicable content. But unlike Fear and the others who were feeling resentment, she was only very surprised.

"Even myself, about this incident, am not without feeling. But I confirm: concluding the principle that as a researcher, I cannot oppose the Lab Chief. Hence, completely unrelated to that principle, I am just muttering to myself on a personal and native note. In my tribe, the punishment for playing word games to go back on promises is to spend a night locked in a wicker basket with poisonous snakes. In other words—'

Un Izoey exhaled deeply and continued:

"I hope to take the Lab Chief on visit to my tribe's village after such a long absence. Not just for one night, but two."

Part 7

"Oh dear! I wonder how things are going on the other side? Will it be akin to a world-class competition of swearing and cursing? Or an ice age of speechlessness? I somehow get the feeling that my loyal subordinate is also glaring at me with cold eyes. It's actually a bit apprehensive for me."

"..."

"In any case, the contents of the letter I wrote them is exactly the same as what I explained to you just now. Actually, the whole incident can be explained even more simply."

Kotetsu was extremely confused.

...Regarding the surrounding situation. Darkness, the abdominal pain, in the middle of fleeing after defeat, the man's voice coming from the darkness.

As well as, lying before her eyes right now—

The Indulgence Disk.

"In other words, the result. I fully intended to give this thing to you from the start. Very simple, isn't it? I simply thought that this was a wonderful opportunity to use the ensuing process to play around a bit with the relationships of my little sister and her friends."

"But... why?"

Kotetsu glared at the darkness where the voice seemed to be coming from, squeezing her voice out. Although the vital functions of the main core were unaffected, damage was damage after all. Simply speaking was causing waves of pain from the abdominal wound. However, now was not the time to be concerned with pain. This could be some sort of trap. Perhaps he wanted to use her as some kind of pawn again.

"Why? You're asking me why? There's no need to make things too complicated in your head. I haven't deviated the slightest from my true nature. Doesn't the answer immediately jump out at you as soon as you think about who I am?"

Yamimagari Pakuaki laughed.

He laughed heartily as though truly feeling joy from the bottom of his heart.

"Do I still need to spell it out? —It's because I am interested in what your side is planning to undertake. Ah, how wonderful that will be, unbelievable, a horrifying unknown that lies ahead!"

Epilogue

Part 1

All preparations were complete.

Now all that remained was finding an opening.

Part 2

After ending the long-distance journey, they returned to the much-missed home.

One arm in a sling, Haruaki used his other hand to open the front door while announcing: "I'm home~" At this moment, Konoha and the girls seemed to be giving off an aura that read "I can't believe I'm letting him do this kind of labor... What a massive failure!" Haruaki could not help but smile wryly. It's just opening the front door, there's no need to be that protective of me.

Haruaki had sort of guessed already, but just as expected, the voice coming from inside the house was not "welcome home—" accompanied by the usual smiling face and open-armed gesture, instead—

"Ficchi told me everything already. Simply leaving me behind and having so much fun on your own is already enough to make me want to complain massively. But now you even come back wounded, that's truly unforgivable!"

For some reason, Kuroe was dressed in a nurse outfit identical to the one Fear had worn during the cultural festival. Standing in an intimidating manner with her legs apart, she was waiting further in from the entrance. Despite dressed in a joking outfit as usual, she was displaying a very serious expression on her face.

"R-Really? You've already heard. Uh, because many things happened... Ah, don't pull so hard."

"Anyway, I'll listen to your explanation while performing treatment. Let's go, let's go. I'll say this first, Haru. I am very unhappy about your recklessness. You'd best be doing what I say with 50% more absolute obedience than usual. Or else, I'll be forced to use healing as an excuse to make indecent poses!"

"How is that forced in any way? But sure, I also admit acting too recklessly, so... Yes, I'm really very sorry..."

Haruaki was dragged by Kuroe all the way to the living room and forced to sit down before he could unpack. Then Kuroe untied his sling, forcibly removed his upper body's clothing and loosened the bandages—According to a doctor's diagnosis, the bone was cracked. They had contacted Bivorio after the battle with Kotetsu that night. Bivorio knew a doctor who was very accommodating for patients requiring discretion, so they asked her to introduce them to that doctor so that Haruaki and Kururi could undergo treatment together. Naturally, they attracted quite a lot of attention upon returning to the hotel, but Haruaki managed to muddle through using an excuse of "my arm was extended at a wrong angle when I fell." As a side note, going out without permission was smoothed over by asking Kaidou-sensei to find a reason. Haruaki really felt bad about making so much trouble for her.

Kuroe used hair imbued with life force to wrap around the part of his arm where the bone was cracked. Fear, Konoha and Kirika all watched silently. Fear and Konoha were sitting formally in seiza posture with solemn expressions, their bodies leaning slightly forward. On the other hand, Kirika was standing some distance away, neither far nor near. For some reason, her expression was extremely gloomy.

"Mode: «Satisfied Yorimori»... There we go. As you probably know already, my hair only stimulates the injury to heal faster, so you still can't overextend yourself. You should probably visit a normal hospital tomorrow and get it checked out by a doctor."

"Yeah... Thanks, I'll do that. On the other hand, you're really being restrictive! It doesn't hurt unless I move the arm, so don't worry!"

Haruaki put all his effort into speaking in a cheerful voice. Fear and Konoha both exhaled at the same time. Using this as a signal—

"Hmph. Seriously, just thinking back makes me really want to scold you for your foolish bravery. You should be counting your lucky stars for ending up with this bit of injury."

"Indeed. Haruaki-kun, if you've learnt your lesson, please think more before acting next time. You really went slightly beyond your ability this time."

The two girls were back to their usual selves. Naturally, they still seemed a little displeased.

"Well then, I shall get changed first... Then I'll brew some tea. Oh, Ueno-san, please do have a seat."

"Oh... I..."

"Yes, then I'll get changed first."

"Lemme help with pouring the tea. After all, it's been four days already. If I don't flaunt my presence, you guys might forget me! Even though I'm clearly the precious, healing, young girl character!"

"Oh, then let me help too—"

"You sit still right there!" "Please stay seated properly!" "Haru, sit down!"

Attacked on all sides, Haruaki had no choice but to stay silent.

Hence, after everyone changed and busied themselves for a while, it was finally time for some tea. At this time, Konoha suddenly looked up as though she realized something in surprise.

"Oh, I just thought of something. It seems that it is currently not the time to be casually drinking tea. After all, having been away from home for four days, there's nothing to cook for dinner tonight unless someone goes shopping, isn't that right? But I'll ask just in case. Kuroe-san, while watching the house over the past few days, did you ever go shopping and restock the food in the fridge—"

"Eh~ No touchy!"

"...I thought so too. So seeing as that's the case, I shall go out to get some groceries first. I remember that the rice needs to be replenished, then there's the other ingredients. There are many things that need to be bought, so I'm hoping for a few volunteers to help carry things."

"No helping it, I'll come with you. Besides, it might be possible that new flavors of rice crackers came out during the past four days. I must go check it out."

"Count me in as well—Because I'm trying hard to flaunt etc."

"The more we delay, the later dinner time will be, so let's hurry and get going. I'm sorry, Haruaki-kun and Ueno-san, I shall have to trouble you two to watch the house for now. We will be back as quickly as possible."

Following through on these directives, Konoha and the girls quickly got ready and took off for the supermarket. On the other hand, was it really okay for Kuroe to remain in her nurse costume? Well, it should be fine. It's Kuroe, after all.

Sitting in the now quiet living room, Haruaki switched on the television and sipped tea. Looks like my daily life will be tasked with watching the house without laboring for quite a while, that feels so boring—Haruaki thought to himself.

Just at this moment—

"...Class Rep?"

Staring at the teacup all this time, Kirika suddenly stood up.

Without looking at Haruaki, she turned around, her ponytail swinging.

"Sorry, today—I'm going home first."

"Eh? But since you're here already, at least catch dinner before you go... I'm sure Fear and the others want you to stay for dinner as well."

"...Sorry."

Even so, Kirika still did not look back. Grabbing her travel bag from the side, she quickly walked out of the living room. Her footsteps in the corridor could be heard, followed by the sound of the main door opening and closing.

Haruaki was simply at a loss, his mouth gaping open. Why so sudden? Was it something he did? Or did he do something to displease her?

No, upon further thought, Kirika had been acting strange all this time. After leaving Kiyomizu Stage last night, she had been acting very strange. Why? Haruaki did not know.

Then he noticed. There was a paper bag next to where Kirika's luggage was placed earlier. Kirika had forgotten to take the bag of souvenirs she had bought. Haruaki actually could have simply phoned her, besides, they

were going to see each other again soon at school, so giving it to her then was fine, but—

"..."

Haruaki still felt very concerned about Kirika's condition. She really looked like she was running away in a panic.

Okay—Haruaki grabbed the paper bag and stood up.

After all, since she had just left, surely he could catch up to her if he quickened his pace.

Part 3

While preparing to make a trip to the supermarket, Konoha once again pondered the results of the race to activate their keys. Sure enough, what bothered her was the silver object flashing in and out of view in the corner of her eye from time to time.

Putting aside Kururi and Kotetsu who had accumulated power for their keys through other methods...

In terms of results, Konoha believed that she had activated her key a step faster than Fear. In terms of time, perhaps it was just a tiny difference, but this tiny difference was decisive and monumental.

In other words, in a fair competition between herself and Fear, in this one-on-one contest, she had certainly obtained victory. A great victory at that, complete victory.

What did this mean? What was this hinting at?

Naturally, it meant that she was obviously the one to stay by his side. At least, she was more suitable than this silver-haired lass who seemed like a country bumpkin new in town. First place. The most promising candidate. "Best of" Haruaki-kun's circle.

She had understood this point early on, but now she was at ease.

She, who had only started taking action seriously not too long ago, had not participated. It was a shame that her power could not be measured directly—No, I have no intention of losing, so it doesn't matter whether or not she joined in or not. Even if she participated, of course I'll win. Absolutely, yes.

Probably due to being immersed in her thoughts, after rushing through the process of getting ready and leaving the house—

Halfway to the supermarket, Konoha realized she had made a huge blunder. A simple and critical mistake.

She had forgotten her purse.

"Don't underestimate me. Because right now, my purse only has a bit of cash. If there are any new rice cracker products, I'll probably be broke after I buy them."

"After a life of debauchery over the past few days, I'm quite strapped for cash too. But I could get some if we make a trip to an ATM. Should we make a slight detour?"

"There's no need for a detour, besides, going home to get my purse will be faster... Could you two start shopping in the meantime? Here, let me give you the shopping list first."

"Okay okay, leave it to me~"

"Muuumuu! Kuroe, got a pen on you? I have this feeling that if I add another zero on that memo, for no particular reason, next to the line where 'rice crackers to go with tea x 2' is written, something very happy will happen!"

"Is there no end to your greed...?"

Konoha sighed and turned back on her own, walking the same route as the way they had come.

Just at the corner where she could see the entrance of their home, Konoha tilted her head in puzzlement.

Currently leaving the house, jogging in the opposite direction, that back belonged to—

(Haruaki-kun...?)

No mistake. Konoha absolutely could not make a mistake in recognizing the sight of his back.

She felt doubtful in her mind. Did something happen?

She could feel from the way he was running that things were not urgent, but better safe than sorry.

In any case, Konoha decided to give chase. Passing by the front of the house without stopping, she quickened her pace towards the direction where Haruaki had disappeared.

Standing before the shelves in the supermarket, Fear and Kuroe were looking at the shopping list, placing the necessary supplies into the basket.

"Phew—that should be it for the fruits and vegetables. Okay, let's head over to the next zone!"

"Ficchi—"

"What's up? Did we forget to get something?"

Pushing the shopping cart that had grown heavy all at once, Fear found Kuroe suddenly looking at her while walking on the side, smiling as she asked:

"—Something good happened?"

"Muu, why do you ask?"

"Well... Because just from listening to the story, Ficchi, you weren't able to the Indulgence Disk in the end. So I was expecting you to be a little depressed—but it turns out you're looking quite lively."

"Hmm." Fear looked up at the supermarket ceiling for no particular purpose.

"Anyway, that's that. It's definitely a shame that I couldn't get the Disk and getting tricked by that man really makes me mad from the bottom of my heart, but no matter how displeased I get, he's not going to return the Indulgence Disk to me. Besides, it's not like that's the only Indulgence Disk remaining in the world. After all, I've been getting Indulgence Disks over time as usual, so I was thinking, I just need to hurry and get a change of mood, then work hard to find the next Disk... Of course, as usual, I intend to ask the superintendent's faction to continue trying their hardest. I hope they can bring news of the next Disk as soon as possible."

"Okay—But something good must have happened in order to make you forget the unhappiness and change your mood, right?"

How sharp of Kuroe—Fear's expression relaxed. Although it was a bit embarrassing, if the other person was Kuroe, revealing feelings from the heart should be okay. Walking beside her, Fear said to Kuroe:

"Yes, you're right."

"...What was it?"

In order to instill that sense of joy into her heart again—

Fear smiled and said:

"There's positive energy inside me too, you know? Not the kind of dark, ominous and horrifying thoughts that used to fill my heart but a certain type of warm emotion. It really exists, to the point that it's big enough that it won't lose to the curse."

Yes, I'll admit it once.

This was neither a mistake, an illusion nor speculation out of subjective and wishful thinking.

It definitely existed in her heart.

The activated key of emotion served as an indicator, providing concrete proof of the emotion's existence.

That alone was enough for Fear to feel that her experiences on this trip were meaningful. Although Yamimagari Pakuaki's actions were infuriating and impossible to approve, Fear felt that the commotion related to the Indulgence Disk and the keys did indeed carry some certain significance.

"I see. That emotion in your heart, Ficchi, surely it must be something very wonderful."

Someone overhearing what Fear had said would definitely be lost completely.

But Kuroe still seemed to understand fully as though it was about her own affairs, returning with a smile of sincere happiness, giving off an aura like an elder sister.

Hence, only when facing Kuroe would Fear feel that perhaps she could confide her inner feelings of a slightly deeper nature.

In the end, what were the feelings she had discovered?

The feeling of not wanting to lose Haruaki. Hugging him, there was that feeling of fulfillment filling up her heart.

It was similar a month or so earlier, through the welcoming festival's school beauty pageant, when Fear had predicted the existence of those feelings—although she was still hesitant, unsure whether she could possess such feelings. That said, she might have to continue searching for and gathering Indulgence Disks to lift more of her curse before she could get an answer.

But different from a month ago, she no longer had the uncertainty from back then.

Right now, she clearly felt the existence of those feelings.

So—Putting aside the the issue of determining presence or absense.

But it was possible that she could already admit that those feelings definitely "existed."

Then treating this as a tiny driving force, she could propel herself towards a slightly more wonderful future.

"...Hmm, I think I can only tell you alone. Remember to keep this a secret."

"Of course, my lips are sealed."

In front of Kuroe's very gentle gaze...

Fear discreetly and honestly revealed—

The kind of little secret that ordinary girls would have.

"Looks like, I-I might... actually... that shameless brat—"

Part 4

Powerlessness. Regret. Guilt.

Burdened by these feelings, Kirika ran.

She hated her own stupidity. Going with the flow without realizing it. Starting on her way home in a daze, she had very naturally made her way to the Yachi home. The sudden feeling of reality back then was reprimanding herself now as well. Overcome with shame, Kirika had no choice but to leave as though fleeing.

Everyone thought that she would stay for dinner as though it were the most natural thing in the world. That family had also accepted her extremely naturally. But this fact filled her with suffering.

Clearly she had failed to do anything.

No, not only that—

"C-Class Rep—! W-Wait up, please stop—!"

"?"

The voice entering her ears caused Kirika to stop reflexively. She spent some time feeling countless emotions rocking her brain while turning to look back in trepidation. He—Yachi Haruaki—was bending forward slightly, panting heavily out of breath. One arm was suspended in a sling while the other hand was holding a familiar paper bag. Presenting the paper bag forward towards her, he said:

"Huff... Huff... This.. You forgot to take it with you... Man, I must be really lacking in exercise."

"Oh... So...rry. Thank you..."

This was her voice out on the surface. Privately in her mind, the voice whispering in her heart was saying a different answer. Absolutely ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous.

Kirika took the paper bag lightly. "Okay." Haruaki caught his breath and straightened his back. Coincidentally, the cellphone in his pocket made a sound. It was apparently a text message. Haruaki said: "Excuse me, hold on" then quickly read the text.

Then with a demure smile, he closed the cellphone.

"Unbelievably, it's from Kururi. Just a single sentence. She said: 'I decided to buy a fishing hat.' ...Haha, I guess my suggestions didn't go to waste. But I still don't get why the reaction is so cold."

"Is that... so?"

Kirika lowered her eyes and only concurred halfheartedly. Why?

"Yeah, although she lost a lot of blood, the injuries she suffered apparently were not serious enough to be fatal... Thank goodness."

"Thank... goodness?"

"Uh, of course, it's not like everything is great, but I just think there were definitely some good things. It's a shame that we weren't able to get the Indulgence Disk, but Hinai Elsie will return to their side."

"—Absolutely... ridiculous."

She could no longer bear it. Her voice slipped out of her mouth.

Staring at his arm, Kirika continued. Why, why, why!?

"You're saying... thank goodness? Absolutely ridiculous, argh, absolutely ridiculous! How could things possible be good, of course not. It's not good at all! Why are you saying something like that? Clearly you... you too—were injured!"

"Uh... Say... Class Rep...?"

Crap, she thought. But her voice could not stop.

Something had gone out of control. The needle of her emotional gauge had broken past the limit.

"This is all... my fault."

"Eh?"

"It's all my fault that you got hurt."

As soon as Kirika finished speaking, Haruaki frantically waved his mobile arm and spoke with a serious expression, anxious and puzzled:

"Th-This isn't your fault, Class Rep! Back then, you were saving me, Class Rep. If you hadn't used «Tragic» to catch me, Kururi and I would have fallen all the way down!"

"That's not what I'm referring to! Not that!"

She could not tear her gaze away from his injured arm.

Helplessness. Regret. Guilt. These emotions were still colliding repeatedly in the depths of her heart.

She felt powerless because she had failed to do what she was supposed to do. No matter how much she regretted, there was no end to her regrets.

Hence, it turned into a sense of guilt that felt like someone was lashing her with a whip.

These emotions were harshly reprimanding her. Tormenting her like a curse.

As a result, Kirika moved her lips in contrition:

"If—If I had caught the key that was tossed at the time, if I had picked it up, if I had snatched it forcefully... I wouldn't have caused you to get hurt! It's all my fault. I also knew Pakuaki's goal from the start. That's right, it's because I knew, that was why I didn't reach out at the time!"

"W-What are you saying?"

Crap.

Shut up.

Hurry and stop.

"If I were the one holding it, surely, surely, surely! I would have opened the box in an instant! Konoha-kun and Fear-kun might have thought the same, but I hope I am different from them! I hope I have surpassed them! No, I believe I have, I've always believed that, so I definitely would have opened the box! Clearly if that happened, you wouldn't have gotten injured! But I hesitated. Because that man was in front of me, I hesitated!"

Ah, yes.

Very certainly. Absolutely. I absolutely can open the box in an instant.

Kirika shifted her gaze to look at his face.

Just as usual—

A little fazed and confused—

Despite suffering an injury yet acting like he had forgotten that injury—

Looking like he was sincerely worrying about my strange behavior—

Looking like he was trying hard to understand my incomprehensible ranting—

His extreme kindness. Just by looking at him, my emotions are able to calm down, the depths of my heart become warm, making me wish to be together with him for eternity—

His face.

For some reason.

As soon as I saw his face, tears gushed out of my eyes.

He stared wide-eyed in surprise. Even so, he was still worrying about my current state.

Let me admit it again. I am certain of being able to activate the key of emotion in an instant. I am certain of providing the key with an upsurge of emotions in an instant. That is why I am filled with regret and guilt.

These emotions implied one thing—Pride.

Regarding him, compared to anyone else in the world.

I—

This girl named Ueno Kirika and this boy named Yachi Haruaki—

"...Because... I love you..."

Indeed, to the extent that I will not lose to anyone in the world, certain from the bottom of my heart that I am the one who loves him the most.

This pride I take in loving him.

Nothing more than that.

"..."

After a few seconds' delay, finally—

I finally realized that those words had slipped out of my mouth into the real world.

I also noticed him looking at me, rooted to the spot.

"Ah—"

Hurry and stop.

No.

Don't stop.

Feeling her cheeks on fire, feeling the heat of the inexplicable tears, feeling his gaze upon her, feeling the skirt she was tightly clutching...

Ueno Kirika went over things in her mind.

She had already decided to fight.

Having come this far already, she could not do anything like escaping.

Assuming he realized her feelings from the words she carelessly let slip just now... No, this assumption was already pointless. Considering her expression, it was almost certain that the message was delivered. Precisely because of that—precisely because of that, she had no choice but to do this.

Go, go, go!

Was 'I love you' really okay by itself? Lacking in both will and meaning, this kind of disappointing confession that simply slipped out in a moment of carelessness, was it really okay? Not okay, right, Ueno Kirika? Since shots had been fired to declare war already, the offensive must absolutely not stop here. This absolutely must not be treated as though it never happened. In that case—

No matter what may result—

I am not being controlled by others. Neither am I being forced by circumstances to say it. Rather than for other's sakes, I wish to hold my head high proudly for myself, making a confession where I am simply following my own feelings.

This time, I must use my own unmistakable hands, I must use my undistorted will, I must use words of genuine truth.

Then there's no choice but to erase... that half-baked confession I just made, right—?

She understood clearly, very clearly.

Hence, Kirika gazed straight at Haruaki once again.

Trying desperately to keep control of her voice that was about to tremble.

Understanding clearly that there was no need to hold back on account of others.

Holding her head up high proudly, she declared:

"I have always... regarded you as a member of the opposite gender—and loved you, Yachi."

She could sense her hand trembling nonstop, clutching her skirt tightly throughout.

She could sense his body and mind still frozen.



As well as behind him—

She could see Konoha standing there, frozen with an expression of utter shock.

Then the shopping bag in Konoha's hand fell to her feet.

"Kono... ha-kun...! Wait...!"

Before Kirika's voice could reach her, Konoha had already turned around and broken into a run.

Part 5

Oh my—What a great surprise. This kind of thing does happen, doesn't it? Back in middle school, Haruaki-kun was so cute the first time he received a love letter and was troubled by it—I think he rejected the girl, citing busy housework, didn't he? Well done, that's the way to go, yeah—! Putting that aside, purse, purse. Speaking of which, I came back to get my purse. Did I just ask Fear-san to buy twenty packs of rice crackers? Just eat as much as you want, whatever. Where's my purse? In this tree hole? There's no squirrel here—?

"Huff... H-Huff... Huff...?"

I don't know why I'm panting out of breath and covered in sweat. Did I run all the way here? Where am I right now—Oh, it's the forest behind the Yachi home. I'm currently leaning my forehead tightly against one of the tree trunks. Why am I here? It feels like, in my mind, I don't understand, there are vague memories of running madly at full speed. My consciousness is extremely hazy. What happened? It seems like something happened that I'm unable to accept immediately while retaining my senses of composure, or is it something that needs a bit of time in order to react calmly? Yes. That's right. Something happened, indeed. But let me wait first. My heart is currently pounding intensely, madly, so let me calm down first. Calm down. Let's forget it for now. Take a deep breath, inhale—exhale—

At this moment, the rustling sound of footsteps on leaves was heard.

Konoha looked back.

"Oh my, hello."

It was Sagisaki-sensei who had arrived, so Konoha greeted her.

—Of course, the normal Konoha would have found it most unnatural for her to appear here, in the forest behind the Yachi home. But right now, she was definitely not normal and absolutely different from usual.

Hence, Konoha allowed her to approach her. Konoha allowed the petite, newly-appointed teacher, dressed in a suit with black garter stockings, yet currently displaying none of her usual cowardice, timidity or frailty, only exuding the aura of a transcendental warrior—Sagisaki-sensei—to make her way step by step towards her.

"I originally intended to wait until bedtime to make my move. But since fortune has presented an even better opening, there is no reason to let it slip by."

It was unlike her usual wishy-washy dialogue that was always weak-willed but trying to act as befitted a teacher. Rather, it was the complete opposite. Whispering softly, she delivered words exuding certainty and a sense of the past.

Next, she took out a strange mask from her jacket's inside pocket and put it on her face.

This was a glamorous mask that covered only the top half of the face, looking as though one would wear it to perform in an opera. Red beads of glass were installed on the eye portions. Short cords extended from the temples of the mask, connected to two slim devices swaying to and fro.

By now, Konoha finally noticed in alarm that things were not quite right. But it was too late.

Her rate of realization was slow enough to be fatal.

A new presence appeared from behind as astounding brute force was used to hold her arms behind her back, immobilizing her.

"You are... Kotetsu!"

"Preparations are complete, Nirushaaki-sama."

"Precisely. Preparations are complete, now that there are two Indulgence Disks for lightening the curse combined with my training as the user. Has none of your side noticed? During the school excursion, I have been training myself to control this Wathe. Hence that is why I was constantly

unwell, resting in my hotel room. This was training that killed two birds with one stone—satisfying Kotetsu's curse that necessitated the drinking of blood while handling the aftermath by using this Wathe to manipulate the memories of the fainted victims. But the foolish humans including your faction apparently regarded these occurrences as nothing more than anemia or heatstroke."

The masked woman reached out and gripped Konoha's head. Konoha struggled violently but Kotetsu sealed her movements with full strength. Impossible to struggle free.

"Nirushaaki...!? You're from last time! You two... what do you intend... to do with me...!?"

"Telling you is fine. This is «Bartolomey Oblivion», a Wathe taken from an auxiliary from the Knights' Dominion earlier. The damage caused to the user's mind by the curse is directly proportional to the effects from activation. Hence, they were mistaken. This is not a tool that could erase at most thirty minutes of memories. The limit of thirty minutes is simply because the insignificant user, an ordinary human, cannot withstand the effects for a longer duration! This limit can be surpassed provided that one is not satisfied with being ordinary, by resorting to extraordinary means. Take myself for example, one who lives simply by seeking strength sufficient to become a dragon, simply by believing in strength, loving strength, relying on strength!"

She struggled but could not escape. Too careless. Konoha gnashed her teeth in anguish.

"A dragon's strength is not limited to just the body. Naturally, the strength of the mind also counts! With my relentless training, I have fully obtained the strength that requires unyielding willpower to withstand it! And now, I have installed two Indulgence Disks! Hence, it is now possible! My goal—Ah, in actual fact, those knights are also mistaken on this Wathe's properties. This is not a Wathe for erasing memories, strictly speaking—"

The woman's lips twisted upwards in a very ominous manner.

"—This is a Wathe for turning the mind back to the past!"

Instantly, a horrifying feeling flashed across Konoha's mind. Instinctively, she was about to comprehend a certain matter. No way? How could it be possible? No way!

"W-Wait...!"

"I can wait no longer! I have waited so long for this moment that I have grown impatient! Become mine, Muramasa, the strongest weapon! Not a fake imitation like those torture instruments but the king of weapons created truly for battle! Activate now, «Bartolomey Oblivion»! Return her mind to two hundred years ago!"

While yelling out, the woman applied greater force to her hands clamping on Konoha's head.

Something was pouring inside, something was gradually lost. Her brain felt as though it were being forcibly stirred. All her feelings rumbled as they swirled into a vortex, swallowed into the center of her body. So scorching so cold so cold so dark so painful so fast so comfortable so hard so scary so contemptuous so happy so sad so soft so ticklish so intense, myself, myself, myself myself!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"Guh, a-aoooooooooooooooo!"

"Nirushaaki-sama?"

"Continue...! Kotetsu! Ga-ahhhhhhh... I shan't... lose... One that ought to become a dragon, I... shan't... lose to this level of... curse! Urghhh, gah, ha! Geh, huff... Don't... underestimate me... Ahhh... Ahhhhh... O curse, O curse, is this all you have!? Bow down... before... me—!"

Like a chain reaction, screams could be heard. Bellows from enduring pain. The stench of blood. The malodor of gastric juices. Spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning.

Are my eyes open? Or are they closed? Konoha gradually could not tell anything at all.

Absolutely everything, everything, everything.

She even forgot—who she was.

(Haru... aki... -kun...)

Unconsciousness.

In a desolate forest.

A figure was standing in one spot silently, slightly short in stature, petite in build, dressed in a frilly Japanese-style outfit.

Without saying a word, this person was staring at the two people collapsed on the ground. The figure simply observed without moving at all. Soon after, one of the collapsed figures sat up.

That person held her head, frowned and wiped the blood dripping from her nose. She spat out the blood lingering in her mouth, mixed with gastric juices. Then swaying unsteadily, she attempted to stand up. Kotetsu frantically reached out to support her by her underarms.

"Are you alright?"

"Hmm... I really cannot be described as alright this time. The damage suffered is more severe than from any battle against formidable foes in the past. But since this damage is not physical, I should recover quite rapidly."

Puttin that aside—She bowed her head to look at the other person.

"The question is, who knows what is the result?"

Then some more time passed.

Sprawled on the ground, the girl slowly raised her upper body.

Her eyes looked sleepy but also like a newly drawn blade.

Nothing could conceal the brightness in her eyes.

Lazily, she surveyed her surroundings and said:

"Hmm...? It seemeth... I have slumbered for a very long time. Where... is this...?"

Nirushaaki smiled. Then powerfully and concisely, she whispered.

"Success."

The newly awakened girl yawned and looked towards the two who were standing.

"Yawn... Although I do not quite understand, little lass over there, covered in the stench of fresh blood and the battlefield, thou givest off an endearing smell. Art thou mine owner currently?"

"Indeed."

"Yes, I understand now."

Then as she stretched and got up, her gaze suddenly stopped on Kotetsu who was supporting Nirushaaki's shoulders.

"What now, thou art a sword too?"

"Yes...!"

She drew near and examined Kotetsu intently up close.

"Oh... Thou seemest to be quite an excellent specimen of a trenchant blade. Furthermore, thou seemest to have taken thy place, hanging on the master's waist, earlier than me. Hmm, how now? Shall we have a contest of swordsmanship to decide who deserves to be the master's primary blade? Fufufu, but do be prepared, even as fellow swords possessed by the same master, thou art not guaranteed to survive a battle against me unscathed. When intending to cross blades with Muramasa, thou must be equipped with such manner of resolve and preparation..."

She was so close that her breath could be felt on Kotetsu's face. The girl gave off an aura like a carnivorous beast evaluating her prey, even giving off murderous intent, as well as a sword's presence that seemed as though it would cut everything and anything into two upon contact.

Amidst this atmosphere, Kotetsu displayed an expression of joy.

Kotetsu's face was blushing red as though on fire, looking up at the sword in front with eyes of idolizing admiration.

"A-Ahhh... M-Muramasa-sama! The sword of we swords, a veritable sword of slaughter...! I have always regarded you as my goal, Muramasa! I have also told Nirushaaki-sama that I am content being a secondary blade if I can stay by Muramasa-sama's side!"

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. That is also my intention."

"Your humble servant, Nagasone Kotetsu Nyuudou Okisato, sincerely believes that being able to fight by your side, Muramasa-sama, is supreme and unparalleled happiness! Ah, the true Muramasa-sama has returned, you have finally returned...!"

"Hmph, what an outrageously long appellation. That said, I have no idea what thou meanst by returning... Oh my?"

At this moment, she frowned lightly and took a step forward.

...Reaching her hand into Kotetsu's skirt.

"A-Ahhhh, hyah, Muramasa... -sama...!?"

After feeling around inside the skirt for a while, she tilted her head and said in puzzlement:

"What is this—I was thinking thou to be a little lass, but thou art verily a lad. Why attire thyself as a girl?"

"A-Ahhh, umm... A former master... Umm... Nnnn!"

"Hmm, I recall now. Among the generals who used to wield me, pederasty was quite fashionable a practice. Nothing to be surprised about."

She withdrew her hand with instant comprehension. Panting and blushing intensely, Kotetsu stared at her in a daze, also looking a little regretful.

"Well then, the battlefield awaits us, although we are not setting off immediately. In any case, we must first restore our energy."

"Since thou sayest so, I shall obey... Besides, hunger is at hand. By the way, my favorite food is meat."

Despite a little unsteady on her feet, but probably due to pride as a the master, Nirushaaki pushed Kotetsu away and started walking on her own. Kotetsu followed behind her.

She—Muramasa—also followed after the new master, taking steps forward.

Just at this moment, she spotted a certain object in the corner of her eye.

Amidst the trees, half buried in a pile of fallen leaves—

Light was reflecting off a pair of glasses' lenses.

"..."

Of course, she had no recollection of those glasses at all.

Simply giving it a glance, she walked past directly.

Afterword

Hello again, I am Minase Hazuki, presenting to everyone C³ Volume 12!! This time, our new character's boob size is less than "ladylike"! Definitely irresistible for people with a thing for that... Hoho, be honest with your inner desires!

In any case, this volume is the school excursion episode.

School excursions sure bring back memories. Back in middle school, I visited Nara and Kyoto, the same place where Haruaki and friends went, whereas in high school, I went to the Tokyo region like most people. I think most residents of Yamaguchi Prefecture followed this kind of itinerary. Because back in the day, school excursions going overseas were really uncommon.

So, the most memorable thing about school excursions is... Although I have to say this every time there's an opportunity, going to Tokyo was my first time stepping foot into an otaku shop! They don't have that kind of shop in Yamaguchi Prefecture!

"Wow~!" I still remember how due to being too excited, I bought four or five bishoujo posters of an anime that was very popular at the time, bringing them home as trophies, despite them taking up lots of space, despite being on a school excursion!

Back then, I was still a covert otaku with only a minority of my friends knowing about my interests.

Because I feared my classmates asking me the fatal question: "What is that~?", I had no choice but to confront a monumental challenge, in other words, eliminating the sense of presence of those posters poking out from my backpack from start to finish, the tension I felt back then was truly... Woah, simply writing about these reminiscences is making my stomach convulse! So that's my most memorable impression from my school excursion! Finally accomplishing the highly difficult mission, I arrived home safely with those posters and to this day, they're still kept in that old house.

After reminiscing about school excursions in this mood, let's move on to the next subject.

Of course, that's the most gratifying fact of the media franchise! Starting October when this book will be released, the anime will also start its broadcast run. The C³ anime. Please watch from start to finish without missing a thing, watching Fear and the others come alive, moving around and talking! Okay, by this point, it's totally fine if you really want to lick the screen! I allow it!

But to be honest, it really was a lot of work in many different areas. After all, there are parts of this story that are not harmless enough to be universally acceptable. Also, there won't be any mass publicity. If anything, this counts as more of a low-key series in progress. Even so, the staff still told me: "Just do it!" Then in real life, they really did complete a very wonderful anime adaptation of C³, I really feel so indebted to them. I'd be willing to do anything to return any part of the favor... Hence, uh~ Dear readers, please show your support for the C³ DVDs or BDs that will be released in the future!

Anyway, that's that and I hope all readers could enjoy the anime adaptation of C³ together with this book.

The afterword has reached the third page on this rare occasion. So let's have some acknowledgements next.

Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, thank you for shouldering the many extra burdens brought to you by the media franchise (the author really is no help with visual designs...) and still drawing beautiful illustrations as usual! I continue to rely on your support!

Editor in charge, Yuasa-sama, apart from the drafts, thank you for being responsible for various arrangements with the outside! Once this book is released, your hectic work should reach a breather... I hope. But perhaps because my drafts might be late, maybe you won't get a breather (how inauspicious).

Also on the media franchise side, I'd like to thank Akina Tsukako-sama who is in charge of the manga version as well as the various editors of Dengeki Daoh. Thank you for adding to my vitality every month! I am also looking forward to the release of the tankoban—

Also, as mentioned previously, I'm also very grateful to director Oonuma as well as all the anime production staff headed by Silver Link. The anime is finally starting to air. I really hope the upcoming lively festival will allow us to celebrate together. Thank you for your care!

Finally, I really want to express my gratitude to everyone, all the readers who have accompanied me throughout this journey!

So, those who've read this volume should already know that the story stopped at a massive cliffhanger. As a result, I hope I can deliver the continuation to you all as quickly as possible.

For the next volume of C^3 , despite the thickness in content, it is set to be released rather quickly next next month, in other words, December—But sorry, Volume 13 is the second collection of short stories (sweatdrops). Like Volume 7, I hope everyone can take a breather first and savor some heartwarming stories to refill your energy.

Of course, I will be working my hardest next, hoping to bring Volume 14 to everyone as soon as possible, so please show your support! See you next volume!

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Echigoya(越後屋): a reference to the successful Mitsui family business, founded in the 17th century, that developed into Mitsukoshi, the root business of the Mitsui Group, one of the largest conglomerates in Japan. Apparently used as an euphemism for bribery.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitsui>
2. ↑ Toudai-ji(東大寺): a Buddhist temple complex located at Nara in Japan, housing the world's largest bronze statue of Buddha Vairocana.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C5%8Ddai-ji>
3. ↑ Unkei(運慶): a Japanese sculptor specializing in statues of Buddha and other important Buddhist figures. His sculptures at Toudai-ji in Nara exhibit an unprecedented flair for realism relative to styles in Japan at the time.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unkei>
4. ↑ Link to image of pillar's hole:
<http://sbarnhill.mvps.org/japan/Images/TodaijiPillar.JPG>
5. ↑ Wa Lolita(和ロリ): with Wa(和) meaning Japanese, Wa Lolita combines traditional Japanese clothing styles with the Lolita fashion subculture.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolita_fashion#Wa_Lolita
6. ↑ Chin-Chin(チンチン): chin-chin is also Japanese slang for "penis."
7. ↑ Shinsengumi(新撰組): the Shinsengumi was a special police force during Japan's late shogunate period and has been portrayed extensively in popular culture.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinsengumi>
8. ↑ "Yami" in Yamimagari means darkness.
9. ↑ Nagasone Kotetsu(長曾祢 虎徹): Nagasone Kotetsu(長曾禰 虎徹, 祢 is the simplified form of 禰) was a Japanese swordmaker during the 17th century. "Kotetsu" is popularly used as a name for swords in various anime, manga and video game series.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagasone_Kotetsu
10. ↑ Kotetsu's catchphrase, "truth be told" is rendered as a single kanji makoto(誠) in Japanese. This kanji, whose meanings include truth, devotion, sincerity, integrity, etc, is also used on the Shinsengumi flag.
11. ↑ Kiyomizu Stage is the main hall's veranda, extended over a precipice and offering a magnificent view of Kyoto's city center.
12. ↑ Kotetsu(虎徹): the kanji for Kotetsu can be split into 虎, meaning tiger, and 徹, meaning pierce.

13. ↑ Benkei(弁慶): Musashibō Benkei(武蔵坊弁慶) was a Japanese warrior monk who served Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Commonly depicted as a man of great strength and loyalty, he is a popular subject of Japanese folklore.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benkei>

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